Desperate Hearts

by DebrahClachair

Summary

In Storybrooke, Mr. Gold strives to be the man Bae used to love. Then Belle is kidnapped to Neverland. If he resumes his Dark One powers to save her, can he control them?

In the Enchanted Forest, Emma battles ogres, zombies and her ex to get back home to Storybrooke, only to find an unexpected villain threatens it. Being the Dark One's apprentice may not be a pleasant calling, but if that's what it takes to become the savior again, does she have a choice?

Adventure. Romance. Angst.

This Rumbelle, Swanfire re-boot is a gift for Once Upon a Time fans partial to seasons 1 and 2.

This story is completely written. New chapter posted every Saturday, Monday and Thursday.

Notes

If you previously read "Waylaid" on FFN, this is a tweak of the chapters posted there plus the second half of the adventure.
Nothing in this Shop Belongs to You

Chapter Summary

The night before the first full moon since the curse broke, Mr. Gold lets Ruby search his shop for her magical red riding cloak. If he's lucky, maybe she'll drop a hint or two about how Belle is doing.

In the library, Belle wonders how Mr. Gold is doing.

Leroy (Grumpy): Just 'cause you possess something don't mean it's yours. (The Crocodile)

The glass wolf sparkled and danced as Mr. Gold dangled it from its gray thread. Sidelong, he glanced at the wolf's owner. Ruby had barely run a comb through her long chestnut hair before rushing to keep her appointment with him. Elbows on the counter, she stared fixated at her keepsake.

Evidently, the possibility Ruby would revert to a wolf at tomorrow's full moon made her anxious. Excellent. He'd always found it easier to influence a desperate soul.

Sure of his audience, Mr. Gold shot the cuffs on his indigo jacquard shirt and pointed at the glass trinket, suffusing the body with an unearthly green glow.

Ruby's eyes widened. "Do you think this'll work?"

"If your cloak is in Storybrooke, it'll be in my shop—unless someone stole it. The day after the curse broke, my place was a free for all. More than one prize ended up in the wrong hands when my back was turned."

"I need to find it."

Mr. Gold watched Ruby twist the fringe of her black-and-silver scarf around one scarlet-nailed finger.

"Tomorrow night will be the first full moon since the curse broke," she continued. "If I didn't bring enough cash, you have to let me work out payments."

Mr. Gold waved his hand. "No charge. It's your cloak. You never bartered it away. All I ask is—"

Ruby's sharp glance stopped him mid-sentence. "I won't report on Belle to you."

Damn it. Mr. Gold favored the lovely young woman with what he hoped was a pleasant smile. "Be my spy? Of course, I wouldn't ask that." At least, not directly. "What I want is for you to be careful about who learns your secret. When someone is forced to struggle with a beast nature—someone like you or me—people can be judgmental... not like Belle."

"She's been a good friend," Ruby murmured.

Mr. Gold nodded. I've found the right track. "You and I never met when I was under the Dark One curse. Back then, I was the stuff of nightmares: lizard skin, black talons, snake eyes. The sight of me scared wee children into obeying their parents and grown men into wetting their pants." Noting
Ruby’s faint smile, he added, "Belle could see past that."

Ruby’s expression took on a wolf-like wariness.

*I overstepped. Time to divert.* "Here. Your wolf is ready to guide you. Let it swing freely. Possession will call to possession. When you near something that belongs to you, you'll feel a tug. When you're very close, the wolf will glow red."

Taking her luminous charm, Ruby’s wariness melted into delight. "Where should I look?"

"Anywhere the wolf leads." Clutching his cane, Mr. Gold stepped back from his counter to gesture around the treasure-filled display cases, shelves, and racks gracing his pawnshop. "If your search brings no joy, try my office and storeroom."

"You trust me not to take something that doesn't belong to me?"

"Why wouldn't I, dear?" *One must give trust to gain trust.*

Ignoring the tension he felt anytime he left someone unchaperoned in his domain, Mr. Gold pivoted on his cane and hobbled to his office. Sweeping back the curtain, he paused on the threshold.

Today's stack of pestering, questionable claims for pre-curse property sat accusingly on his desk. His current restoration project—touching up the gold leaf on a music box—beckoned him from his worktable. His shoulders relaxed. *Just a quick break before I slog through more inventory,* he promised himself.

Mr. Gold limped to his table, lowered himself onto his chair, and arranged his tools. He paused to listen to Ruby bumping around his showroom. He was fairly certain the magical cloak that could prevent her transformation from human to wolf was not in his keeping. Vaguely, he recalled a swathe of red cloth in a display case that had nestled three violins throughout the long years of the curse. But when the trio of fiddlers had come for their instruments on *Let's Raid Mr. Gold's Day,* the cloth under them had turned out to be a witch's tartan cape.

"No matter," Mr. Gold whispered to himself. *Ruby will still owe me a favor.*

His thoughts strayed to images of Belle taking stock of the old library, holding fort at the lending desk, sharing nursery tales with the children at story hour. He might never again hear her gentle voice call him *Rumple,* but he could still hold her chipped cup and think of her. If he could wrangle a few details out of Ruby—what books Belle was reading, her reaction to movies, her opinions of the new people she was meeting, on her own for the first time in her life—then his fantasies of her would be enriched. That would be more than enough payment for a simple seeking spell.

Sitting at her desk behind the circulation counter, Belle surveyed the library. Nobody needed her.

The fifth graders on their weekly book borrowing trip had quieted down to browse the young people's shelves.

At a nearby table, Polly Jenks from the gas station was comparing the willowy maidens on Judith McNaught book jackets as if trying to recall which ones she'd already read.
Seated by a window, Myrtle Kobbler thumbed the copy of Mother Goose that Belle had helped her find. As the plump, gray-haired woman scanned her chosen page, her eyes narrowed, and her jaw dropped.

She must be reading her own story. Belle had seen that stunned look on several faces since she'd reopened the library nine days earlier. She wasn't surprised when Myrtle snorted, slammed the book shut, and marched out the front door.

On the fifth graders' first visit the previous Monday, the sheriff's grandson Henry had shown her the fairy tale that pictured her and Rumple: Beauty and the Beast. The version in my book was more accurate, he'd said, but my mom tore the pages out. I think she was hiding them from Mr. Gold.

When Henry had let on his adoptive mother was Regina—something Belle hadn't heard before—she'd continued to smile. Such a sweet boy didn't need another tale of how the woman who'd raised him had wreaked havoc on someone's life. Besides, Belle never told anyone the Evil Queen had locked her up throughout the long years of the Storybrooke curse on a psych ward for the criminally insane. Under false pretenses, of course, but she didn't like discussing it. So she had thanked Henry and promised to read the story later.

When she had, she'd cried.

The Belle in the book had contended with a spoiled prince cursed to beastliness for being rude. One kiss, and he'd turned into a shiny faced hunk ready to provide a pampered happily ever after. No unresolved issues. The end.

Her beast, Rumplestiltskin, was more complex—an enigma of light and dark, a constant challenge, a mystery to be uncovered. Back in the Enchanted Forest, she'd known he was the grand, boundless, unpredictable adventure where she wanted to spend her life.

Here in Storybrooke, she'd been less brave. She'd wanted her beast to change and be done with it—no more surprises. After three decades as Regina's pawn, anything other than complete control over her circumstances had panicked her. When Rumple couldn't guarantee her a ready-made happy ending, she'd fled.

How could I give up like that? Did I think he was a character in a picture book? What happened to 'I'll never stop fighting for him'?

Belle sighed as she matched returned books with their checkout cards. Nineteen days had passed since she'd last seen Rumple—the day his inquiries had secured her this job. Seventeen since Ruby, Granny, Billy, and Leroy had helped her make the second-floor apartment livable. Sixteen since she'd begun rehabilitating the shuttered public library. Eleven since she'd accepted her father's promise to never again tell her what she should think and feel—especially in regard to Rumple. Nine since she'd unlocked the front doors for the library's grand reopening. Day-by-day, her newfound independence as caretaker, dispenser, and promoter of Storybrooke's books was restoring her spirit.

If only she'd found this self-reliant life the day the curse broke, then she could have asked Rumple to be her partner instead of her protector. Maybe we could have restored each other.

As she stacked the books for re-shelving, the first of the fifth graders presented her pick: Who Censored Roger Rabbit. Belle cocked her head. Paige certainly has a favorite animal. The week before, when she'd identified Watership Down as her number one book, Belle had suggested Rabbit Hill.

She removed the checkout card and stamped in the due date. "You might enjoy Alice in
Wonderland." Glancing over, she saw Paige frown. "My dad's in that book. I'm working up to it."

Before Belle could respond, the front door opened, and David Nolan called her name. "Good morning, Sheriff," she said.

"Acting Sheriff." He flashed a smile that matched his nickname, Charming. "Did I understand you correctly on the phone? You found some information that could bring Snow White and Emma back from the Enchanted Forest?"

"Maybe." Belle moistened her lips.

Thirteen days had passed since she'd begun opening the crates covering the second-floor storage area and discovered the Dark One's library—thirteen days of debating with herself whether to keep the volumes from Rumple for his own good or trust his intentions to be a better man. After all, the first thing he'd done with the magic he'd brought to their new land was conjure a wraith to punish Regina. Protecting the Evil Queen was what had yanked Charming's wife and daughter out of Storybrooke. And yet, Rumple's most notable use of magic since had been a good deed—re-attaching Dr. Whale's arm.

I have to trust him.

Belle looked up at David. "I found some books tucked away upstairs. I'll show you after I'm finished here."

She smiled as the fifth graders lined up at her desk. This week, David's grandson Henry wasn't among them. He's supposed to teach me how to use a computer later. I hope he's not ill. Once he showed her how to do an Internet search, maybe she could find some advice on the best way to apologize for telling one's true love, I don't want to see you again. Ever.

Smeet stared at the sign declaring Regina Mills Park that some scalawag had spray-painted over with Evil Queen Park. He chomped down on his wad of gum, worked it around in his mouth, then spat it out the floral van's window, aiming for the Q.

Nearly twenty minutes he'd been waiting, and the damn kids wouldn't get off the playground castle. The X marked on the base of the orange plastic tower teased Smeet with its promise of a hard-to-find-object buried beside it. He wanted to start digging—but not in front of a bunch of nosy kids. So here he sat as his mid-morning break ticked away.

Well screw Moe. He wouldn't deliver another bouquet until he'd dug up what he'd been sent to find. Working for the nobleman-turned-florist might be safer, but his old boss Captain Hook paid more.

Truth be told, Smeet didn't know who'd hired him. But didn't marking the spot with an X scream classic Hook? Just because he'd never seen Hook in Storybrooke didn't mean the captain hadn't been lurking, waiting to rebuild his crew. One could dream.

Smeet glanced over to the picnic tables where nuns—or fairies, or whatever they fancied themselves these days—were laying out lunch. Finally. The kids in uniforms from the Sisters of Eternal Purity
St. Meissa Home for Lost Children would be clearing out. That left the pipsqueak in the Donald Duck T-shirt.

Smee treated himself to a third stick of gum.

Then annoyance turned to exasperation. Just when the nuns were calling their kids away, what does the pipsqueak do? He pulls out a toy shovel and sticks it into the muddy ground beside the orange plastic tower marked with the X.

Smee shot from the van like a cannonball. "Hey, bucko. Scram."

The kid glanced up through shaggy black bangs with a nobody tells me what to do look.

"Hey! I said—" The dull thud of the shovel hitting a hollow metal box brought Smee to a dead halt. When the kid struck the box again, scraping dirt away from its side, Smee jumped forward and grabbed him by the wrist.

The kid screamed.

Smee sprang back, waving his hands for Stop! He barely had time to mutter "I'll pay you" when a young nun came trotting over from the picnic tables.

"How much?" the kid whispered.

Smee peered at the partially exposed biscuit tin. Would Captain Hook pick a rusty box sporting a wreath of Christmas bells to hide a treasure? If this ain't what I came for, at least buying it will get rid of the pipsqueak. "Everything I've got on me," he whispered back.

The gangly nun came to an awkward stop, her navy-blue cape swinging. Her big doe eyes looked embarrassed and determined at the same time. "You need to leave. Mother Superior is calling Sheriff Nolan right now."

The kid looked up with a toothy grin. "It's all right, Miss. This is my... uncle. We were just goofing around."

"Oh! Your uncle." The nun looked relieved.

Smee winked at the kid. To the nun he said, "Maybe you better tell Mother Superior to hold that call."

The nun about-faced and raced back to her group.

When Smee looked down at the kid again, he was clutching the grimy box to his chest. "Empty your pockets, uncle."

Despite turning out every one, all Smee could come up with was $14.27 in change plus the rest of the pack of gum. When he held out his meager assets, the kid hugged the biscuit tin tighter.

"Whatever's in this box must be pretty valuable, huh? Maybe I should find someone who'll pay me more."

Smee smiled. Looking at this kid was like seeing himself, only younger. He'd feel really bad punching him after the nuns left. But he remembered the wise words he'd once heard Mayor Mills give Moe: Strong men take what they need.

"Okay, bucko," Smee said. "Have a peek inside and tell me what it's worth." It would be a pity
hitting the squeaker over nothing.

Grinning, the boy set the box on his lap and wiggled open the hook-and-eye fastener. He worked his stubby nails under the lip and tilted it up by its crusty hinges.

Looking inside, the kids' eyes bugged out like musket balls. "You want me to w-w-what?!" He shrieked and dropped the box. Then he staggered to his feet and stumbled over the brambles that separated the playground from the road. When he touched pavement, he sped off towards town.

Smee burst out laughing. "Go play with your dolls, you skinny git." He stooped to pick up the tin box.

*What the hell's in this thing, anyway?*

---

Wattpad: [Debrah Clachair](https://www.wattpad.com/debrahclachair)

Tumblr: [The Wizard of Grouch](https://thewizardofgrouch.tumblr.com)

Twitter: [DebrahClachair@DebrahClachair](https://twitter.com/DebrahClachair)

Pinterest: [Debrah Clachair](https://www.pinterest.com/debrahclachair)
Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold tells Ruby about the first time he saw Belle.

Belle tells David about finding the books from Rumple's Dark Castle library.

David tells Regina about Henry's night terrors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Sheriff Graham Humbert** *(The Huntsman)*: I thought you were a wolf. *(The Heart is a Lonely Hunter)*

"Mr. Gold."

He continued exhaling a steady soft stream of air, guiding the tail end of the feather-light gold leaf until the sheet settled smooth and unwrinkled on the side of the music box. He looked up from his magnifying apparatus to see Ruby standing in the doorway holding a child-sized crossbow and three small arrows.

"The wolf charm works," she said. "Granny made me these when I was four."

"But no cloak." Mr. Gold swept his hand across his office. "Hopefully, your luck will improve in here."

As Ruby entered, Mr. Gold looked to his tool holder for his agate burnisher.

Abruptly, she said, "It's not a curse."

Mr. Gold looked up to see Ruby dangling her wolf at arm's length, stalking it around the shelf-lined walls of his office.

"My condition," she continued. "At least, I don't think it's a curse. It runs in the family. Wouldn't that make it... genetic?"

"With magic that's meaningless. The originator of the curse could have visited it on all future generations in perpetuity." As he spoke, Mr. Gold observed a sign of opposition in Ruby's eyes. *Ahh*, he said to himself and readjusted his answer. "But whether a condition is a curse or a natural trait, it's the individual that determines how it manifests." He leaned forward as if he were telling a secret. "What you're thinking is that some aspects of the wolf are so much a part of you that nothing and no one could make you give them up."

A deep sigh went through Ruby. She lowered the glowing glass trinket.

*I'm in. Tread cautiously.* "You like the ability to distinguish scents and know what they mean, to bound and leap like a wolf, to feel no fear." Mr. Gold noted Ruby's reaction to each word before adding, "Only someone who's navigated the benefits and the risks of such power would understand
Ruby cocked her head, betraying a hint of suspicion. "Someone like you?"

Mr. Gold shrugged. "Before I took on the Dark One curse, I was one of the multitudes of powerless peasants under the boot of any nobleman's henchman who staked a claim to our hard-earned property, our skilled labor, our self-respect, even our children. Unlike you, I had a choice about taking on a beast nature. When I think of the consequences of my decision, I regret nearly everything… except this: having the power to face the bullies on their own terms."

Ruby nodded. "I hear you. Before I knew what I could do, the village jerks used to make me kiss them or they'd trample my berry baskets. I put up with it. But after, during the rebellion, I was Charming's best warrior. Hard core. All I had to do was touch the clasp on my red cape, and King George's twits would run screaming. I loved that." She bit her lip. "But the risks… I'm afraid that without my cloak, I'll do something awful."

"Indeed, the risks. Keep looking, dear, and I'll tell you a story."

Ruby resumed hunting. Mr. Gold tilted back in his chair. "In the old world, to stay grounded with everyday life, I'd masquerade as a hooded old man and walk among the common folk. I'd amuse myself with trifles—tripping up knights as they strutted around, spiriting coins out of tax collectors' coffers back to peasants' hidey-holes.

“One day I was walking through a market when a riding party of young aristocrats on pretty white steeds pranced through the gate. An old woman passed too close for one knight's liking, and he reared up his stallion to knock over her potato cart. Then he raised his whip and lashed it across her back until she cowered, pleading for mercy. I didn't feel amused. Darkness filled me with one thought—to lock him and all his snooty friends in a strangling spell and make them fear for their lives."

Ruby stopped short. Once again, her expression was wary—even afraid.

Good. "Then something changed me. One young noblewoman jumped off her horse, slogged through the mud, slapped the knight's whip from his hand, crouched in the muck beside the old woman, picked up every last potato, and wiped them off on her own velvet riding breeches—all the while giving the knight the tongue-lashing of his life." Mr. Gold paused and pressed his eye to his magnifier. "That's the first time I saw Belle."

Mr. Gold sensed rather than heard Ruby come closer. He felt his cheeks grow warm. I've overstepped again. What's wrong with me? But when he looked up to see Ruby standing on the other side of his table, her smile was pure sympathy. "So Belle is your magical red cloak? You should go to the library and tell her that story yourself."

Indirect? I couldn't have been more obvious if I'd lumbered in waving a white flag. Possible approaches to saving the situation raced through his head until he was left with his least favorite: honesty. "I can't. I can't face her. I can't fix what's wrong between us. I just want to know… how she's doing."

The first time David met Belle, down in the Storybrooke mine, he'd watched her tell off Rumplestiltskin for not being honest with her and her father Moe for trying to control her life. Her parting shot had been, I don't want to see either of you again. Ever.

As David followed Belle up the library's back stairs, he thought, She certainly has spirit for such a
After the mine incident, David had nearly dumped her father in jail. For Moe to have paid Smee to handcuff his daughter to an ore cart and send her across the border had been kidnapping, and the intended outcome—erasing her Enchanted Forest memories—a crime even worse. Then Moe had confessed his motive.

_I had to free her from the clutches of Rumplestiltskin. Back home, he demanded her as payment for stopping ogres from massacring our town. She made the sacrifice. That's the kind of hero Belle is. I didn't see her again until Smee rescued her—over thirty years later. Want to know the first thing she said to me? "He wasn't holding me captive. I chose to be with him." Now what does that sound like to you?_

_Stockholm Syndrome_, David had answered and released Moe without charges. Good thing the Storybrooke curse had stored so much useful earth information in his brain. In the Enchanted Forest, he wouldn't have known what to call the situation except something no one wants for their daughter.

Reaching the landing, Belle stopped. When David joined her, he gazed down at her face. "I hope Mr. Gold's not bothering you."

"Rumple? No." Belle sighed. "He's never even called."

She pushed open the stairwell door and led David into the second-floor storage area. When he saw the sea of crates, he whistled. "Wow. How many?"

Belle cocked her head. "Six hundred and forty-two—straight from the Dark Castle. Roughly half contain Rumple's library and half mine."

David raised his eyebrows. _Who would ever want that many books? At least one of them must be a how-to on universe hopping._

Raising the lid of a nearby crate, David scanned the spines and chose a volume. "How did you identify them? I've never even seen this type of writing before."

Belle shrugged. "I have kind of a knack for languages. I picked up more when I worked for Rumple."

_Stockholm Syndrome_, David repeated to himself. _Thirty years as the Dark One's slave and she calls it working for him._

"Rumple had a rather wide acquaintance—elves, gnomes, bears. All sorts except fairies. I even picked up some Ogrish."

"Ogrish? Seriously? Is that what it sounds like?"

Biting back a grin, Belle nodded. "You do know Rumple brokered every truce that ever existed between ogres and humans in the Enchanted Forest, don't you? One summer I accompanied him, took notes, kept his calendar."

_I didn't know they had a language._ David slid the hidebound volume back into the box. Then he pointed to two stacks of books near three open crates. "What about those?"

"Hmm, well... I was trying to separate them." Belle looked aside. "By subject matter... dark magic versus light. Then I realized nearly any magic can be used either way. And if the magic is really dark, well, good magicians need to understand it to stop it. And even light magic can be bad... what is it you call it? "Yes." "No." "Yes." "No." ..."
if it keeps people from tackling their own problems."

"I see what you mean."

"The important thing is the person casting the magic—whether their intentions are good or bad."

*Which puts us the hell out of luck in Storybrooke.* Of the three individuals who could really throw magic around, only one was noble, pure, and light—but the Blue Fairy needed fairy dust to be any use at all. Her plan for retrieving his wife and daughter was to repair the Mad Hatter's portal-creating hat, but that hope depended on the dwarf miners striking fairy diamonds. *We're still waiting.* As for the other two, Regina and Rumplestiltskin, their history casting magic was very dark indeed.

*But with Snow and Emma dragged by a wraith into another universe, maybe we need a little dark magic.*

"When Rumple comes, we'll just have to trust him to know what he's looking for." Belle pressed her hands together and studied the room. "I have some ideas to make this place comfortable for him—add some shelves, a desk, an easy chair."

"Don't worry. I won't bring Gold here. I don't want to cause that kind of trouble."

Belle tilted her head. "I know the stairs are steep, but Rumple can use the elevator. No trouble."

"I didn't mean for him. I meant for you."

"Me?" Belle frowned. "I'm sure Rumple will be researching in the evenings after he locks up his shop. By then, the library will be closed too. If he needs anything, my apartment is down the hall. Even bringing tea wouldn't be a trouble."

"Belle, that's not what I'm talking about." David's eyebrows pulled together. "You ran away from him—"

"A lover's quarrel," she said quickly then bit her lip.

"Stockholm Syndrome," David muttered under his breath.

"What? Did you say Stockholm Syndrome? What is that? Why does everyone keep saying that to me?"

*Poor Belle.* Like Mad Hatter Jefferson, she didn't have a second identity. Since the Storybrooke curse hadn't bothered to implant one, it hadn't bothered to implant any earth knowledge either. *Dr. Hopper could explain it better.*

Belle crossed her arms, her blue eyes glinting with the same spirit she'd displayed in the mine. "I know the term has something to do with the erroneous assumption that Rumple held me captive. Let me assure you, I was never his prisoner. Of my own free will, I agreed to a deal to—"

David's phone buzzed. "On duty. Got to take this." He pulled his cell from his leather jacket.

"Hello?"

Without preamble, Regina launched into an accusation. "When were you going to inform me about Henry's night terrors?"

Her tone made David's shoulders tense. Clasping his phone between his palms to silence her, he told Belle, "I'll get back to you."
When David strode to the stairwell and started down the steps, he heard the door close behind him. The old building has a draft, he thought. Belle was too polite to have slammed the door on purpose.

David delayed returning the phone to his ear. Regina's a pain, but she is trying to reform. Maybe she could look through the Dark One's collection. Surely, having another woman around would be less traumatic for Belle than facing her captor. She and Regina could get to know each other over tea.

When David reached the bottom, he lifted the phone again. "Yes?" He caught Regina mid-sentence.

"—like the scariest video game ever, Henry said. Flames everywhere. When I went to wake him for school, I found he'd been sitting up all night. I kept him home, so he could sleep. An hour later, he woke up screaming."

"He'll get through it. He has an appointment tomorrow with Archie."

"Dr. Hopper? You think that's funny? These aren't psychological nightmares. Henry can feel the heat."

His grandson's first overnight with Regina since the curse broke, and she was acting as if she wasn't the one who'd sent him into counseling in the first place. "I know he can feel the heat. That's how Snow described it, too."

"Described what?"

As if you don't know. "The Sleeping Curse Netherworld. They both took a bite of the same apple—the one you poisoned."

"That second half wasn't meant for Henry. If Emma was a fit mother, she wouldn't have let him—"

"—eat sweets between meals? He grabbed your apple turnover because he knew you meant to poison his real mom. That's the kind of boy he is—a hero. Just like his grandparents."

Silence. Then, "Sleeping Curse Netherworld. I never heard of such a thing."

Maybe if you read up on your dark magic before you cast it, you'd get a clue. And Snow says only men refuse to read instructions.

"The Sleeping Curse Netherworld is where Henry was until Emma's kiss broke your curse. Archie thinks the nightmares are a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. My wife had them for half a year. Then they went away." Charming leaned against the stairwell. "But if you think the nightmares might be supernatural, maybe you can research them. Belle found Rumplestiltskin's library."

Regina groaned.

"Wow. You're the one who hid it." Charming rubbed his forehead. "You knew I've been searching for a way to bring Snow and Emma back. You knew Rumplestiltskin said his books might help. Yet you didn't let on you knew where they were."

"Never mind that. I'll look at them now. I don't know all the languages. That imp had a lot of books. But maybe—"

"Forget it." Reform? Who was I kidding? She'll do anything to keep Henry's real mom and grandmom away from Storybrooke. "I'm picking Henry up at three o'clock. Make sure he's ready."

Without waiting for Regina's response, Charming ended the call. Now he had no choice. He had to
talk to Rumplestiltskin.

Chapter End Notes

I always wondered what happened to Rumplestiltskin's extensive library. Because the furniture in his study was so different than Belle's, I always figured they had matching, his-and-her, tower retreats.
Well, It Is My Shop

Chapter Summary

In Storybrooke, Smee offers Mr. Gold information. He's not interested (his loss).

In the Enchanted Forest, Mary-Margaret insists there's no such things as zombies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin): And yet, still closed. (The Crocodile)

Mr. Gold smiled at Ruby, taking in her details about Belle's new life without him. When her introduction to hot dogs, French fries, malts, and chocolate sundaes had led her to lament that her skirt felt tight, Ruby had introduced her to Zumba classes, jogging, and racquetball.

"She has yet to try a burger, though. She won't say why."

As Mr. Gold had imagined, Belle was devouring the books in the library, learning about their new world. Travel was her favorite—from earth's great cities to the astounding contrasts of its deserts, seas, forests, and jungles... all the places Mr. Gold was planning to visit with her on his quest to find his son—before he'd learned that crossing the border would erase his memories of Baelfire and before her doubts about their relationship had become certainties.

"She's reading a lot of psychology books, too."

And Belle—hidden away in an asylum throughout the repetitious years of the curse—was meeting the residents of Storybrooke for the first time.

"Everyone loves her."

Mr. Gold remembered the chagrin on Gaston's face when Belle had scolded him. "She can even make bullies—"

His jangling doorbell interrupted them. What now? Gripping his cane, Mr. Gold hoisted himself to his feet. "Let me see to that. You keep searching."

As he made his way across his office, he let new visions of Belle form in his mind. They made his steps feel almost light. Then he passed into his shop and saw a man he never wanted to see again squatting before a showcase. Even worse, Mr. Smee had jimmed it open to poke around the knives, cutlasses, and swords inside.

Without a second thought, Mr. Gold raised his left hand and sent a lightning bolt of what the hell do you think you're doing across the room to slam the cabinet door against him.

Mr. Smee squealed like a pig, fell on his butt, and clasped his bruised wrist. No longer blocked, the door shut, and the lock clicked.

"I'm closed for inventory. Until further notice, people enter my shop by appointment only. You don't
Mr. Smee scrambled to his feet. "Moe sent me to fetch something."

"Tell him to bring his pledge slip and final payment, and he can have whatever it is back."

"Not something he pawned—" Mr. Smee adjusted his red cap.

Giving himself time to lie, thought Mr. Gold.

"—something from back home. A ceremonial iron dagger."

Mr. Gold sighed. How many times do I have to repeat this? "For something he owned in the Enchanted Forest, he needs to submit a detailed description. I have three days to turn it over or explain why I can't. If he isn't satisfied, then he can petition the acting sheriff to arbitrate and, if needs be, conduct the search himself. That's the deal."

"I know. I was at the town hall meeting, too. But you got to admit—between Moe and you the situation is a bit more delicate. Not too many dads could stand being in the same room with the guy that slept with his daughter."

Mr. Gold clenched the head of his cane in his right hand and flexed the fingers of his left. Smee would make an excellent snail.

His bell jingled. He glanced over to see Dr. Hopper gingerly opening the door.

"I know I don't—don't have an appointment, but—"

"Please come in. You're always welcome."

Smee strutted across the floor, stopping squarely in front of the marionette couple of the peasant farmer and his peasant wife. Mr. Gold felt a twinge of remorse at the thought of the abject fear carved into their wooden faces—the terror they'd felt the instant before the potion he'd intended for a different couple had done its worst. That was the reason he'd kept them on display. Reminding himself just how easily magic could go awry was another way to keep himself grounded.

Mr. Gold heard a gasp and looked at Dr. Hopper. His horror mirrored the marionettes'. Did he just now recognize them?

Smee sniggered. "These are a laugh riot. How much?"

"Not for sale, dearie," Mr. Gold snapped.

Hearing a noise behind him, Mr. Gold twisted to see Ruby holding up an old-world lock and key.

"These are mine, too." She smiled weakly.

"Ah. Tomorrow night do what you must. If you leave me your scarf, dear, I should be able to come up with some useful spell by the next full moon."

Ruby opened her mouth to speak, glanced over at the new arrivals, and nodded.

"If I'm successful, in exchange I want... some nice takeout. Fish and chips and iced tea."

Laying her recovered treasures on the counter, Ruby unwrapped her fringed checkered scarf from around her neck and handed it to Mr. Gold. He watched her tuck her wolf into her breast pocket and
scoop up the rest of her belongings. When she sauntered towards the door, he hobbled after her, noting the relative positions of innocent bystander Dr. Hopper and potential threat Smee. I took him before. I can do it again.

Stopping in the doorway, Ruby cocked her head. "When Belle asks how you're doing, what should I say?"

Mr. Gold felt a spark of electricity. When Belle asks... He coughed, elaborately casual. "Oh, tell her I'm getting by. People have stopped harassing me on the street." For the most part. "The deal I set for orderly property restoration has stopped the break-ins." Spreading the rumor that anyone touching my property will immediately turn into marble statue didn't hurt. "This week I haven't received one anonymous threatening phone call." Yet.

Ruby sucked her breath through her perfect white teeth. "Yeah. Belle told me about all that. She'll be glad things are better." With a lopsided smile, Ruby closed the door behind her.

She'll be glad, Mr. Gold repeated to himself as he turned back to his other customers. Nothing can anger me now.

He even nodded graciously at Smee. "Unless there's something else, I'm sure Dr. Hopper would prefer privacy to ask whatever it is—"

"Can you turn me young again?" Smee blurted out. "Like you said you would. I managed to stay this age for quite a while, but what I really want is to be young." Glancing at Dr. Hopper, he snarled, "This doesn't concern you." He strode up to seize Mr. Gold's arm. Under his breath, he continued. "You and me, we're the same. Independent contractors. You don't like surrounding yourself with minions. I don't like being under the thumb of a boss. Let's do business, man to man."

Mr. Gold jerked away from Smee's grasp. "Can I make you young again? We'll never know, will we, dearie? I made that deal in exchange for a magic bean. You didn't deliver."

Smee waved his hands in the air. "Couldn't help it. My head was turned by a pretty woman. How was I to know she was Hook's pretty woman?"

Hook's woman? Mr. Gold felt cold anger in the pit of his stomach. Before that marauding cur came along, Milah was my wife. "Get out." He turned on his heel and limped across the floor, cracking his cane down sharply with each step. Out the corner of his eye, he saw Dr. Hopper cowering between a suit of armor and a grandfather clock.

"She was almost worth it," Smee added.

Furious, Mr. Gold swung around, barely keeping his balance. "Break a deal with me, dearie, you get no second chance."

"You'll want what I have. Trust me. It's information."

"Anything of value you know, you've already told me." Mr. Gold squeezed his left hand in a mock stranglehold. "Remember?"

Smee backed towards the door. "Your funeral."

Emma counted the corpses strewn across the Enchanted Forest clearing. Nine zombies. The monsters had been swinging swords and axes, but thank goodness, they'd lurched slowly enough for three women to take down.
Of course, a soldier, a bandit-princess, and a bail bondsperson-sheriff aren't just three everyday women. Even more badass, they'd each overcome three zombies while protecting the land's least liberated princess.

Emma glanced at Aurora who, ladylike, was averting her eyes from the gore to pick brambles out of her tattered chiffon robes. Earth's version had her dead to rights—her biggest asset was looking beautiful while she slept. Of course, the princess deserved to be cut some slack. On the day they'd met, a wraith had taken her fiancé's soul to who knew where. Seeing that would sap anyone's will to fight.

Soldier Mulan protected Aurora in honor of Prince Philip's memory. Unlike the princess, she stared at the bodies as she cleaned her sword with a handful of grass. She was sterner than her movie counterpart, but that just made her more reliable in a fight.

And Mary-Margaret? Emma smiled to herself. Her mother could talk with birds like in her Snow White fairy tale. She could also fell a hammer-wielding dead guy from fifty yards with her bow and arrow. "Thanks. The last of the zombies nearly smashed my skull in."

"Zombies?" Mary-Margaret ran her fingers through her short black hair. "They can't be zombies. Not in the Enchanted Forest. Dead is dead."

Mulan's forehead pinched together as she ran her gaze over the tiny battlefield. "What are zombies? These were my friends."

The ones we buried last week. Emma grimaced, remembering their return to Safe Haven and finding everyone with their hearts ripped out. At least we gave them a nice funeral.

"The man over there? That's Durwood. He was a cabinet maker before the curse tore our land apart. For us he made spears. And Rhoda. The nets she wove caught supper for the whole camp." Mulan inhaled sharply. "How could they be here? How could they attack us?"

Emma stepped closer to Mulan, started to reach out, then dropped her arm. Hugging someone wearing full armor was kind of hard. "A zombie is not the person you knew—just their corpse. Re-animated."

Aurora made a gulping noise and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Do I have to repeat myself?" Mary-Margaret perched her hands on her hips. "There are no zombies in the Enchanted Forest. If there's one thing magic can't do, it's raise someone from the dead."

Emma rolled her eyes. Why did her mother have to act like the expert all the time? They were practically the same age. "That's exactly what I'm saying. Zombies aren't someones. Zombies are puppets someone who's not dead is controlling. Someone like—"

"—Cora." Mary-Margaret scowled. "I knew she could command the living by removing their hearts but not the dead. I hate thinking about it."

That evil sorceress can command the living by taking out their hearts? Did she teach her daughter Regina? That was something Emma didn't like thinking about. "This time, we have to cremate. That should prevent them popping back to life like monsters in a video game."

"Video game?" Aurora asked.

"Hard to explain," Mary-Margaret answered.
In this chapter, the Swan half of ship #Swanfire has sailed into view. The other half is coming (but not for a few chapters).
What Do You Want?

Chapter Summary

Dr. Hopper recognizes the wooden dolls.

King George orders lasagna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Dr. Whale (Victor Frankenstein):** I need magic. *(The Doctor)*

"Smee. What a vile man," Mr. Gold muttered to himself. Looking up, he saw Dr. Hopper still frozen on the other side of his shop. He straightened his maroon silk tie and put on his most ingratiating smile. "Takes one to know one, right?"

A shiver coursed through Dr. Hopper, making his ginger curls tremble. Waving his hands, he popped out of his corner. "Oh, no. I wasn't—wasn't thinking that. Nothing of the sort."

Mr. Gold pointed at the marionettes. "Not even when you saw those?"

Dr. Hopper passed his umbrella from palm to palm. Then he sidled towards the dolls as if anxious for a closer look but afraid of taking it. "Seeing those doesn't make me think of—you. It makes me think of me. I've noticed them in your shop before, many times, but I—I didn't know why they bothered me so. This is the first time I've seen them and—and remembered."

Mr. Gold rested on his cane. "As agreed at the town hall meeting, I'm prepared to surrender all items to their rightful owners. But if I acquired an item in a deal—either here or in the Enchanted Forest—then that item is mine."

Dr. Hopper stared down at his scuffed brown loafers, the picture of shame and misery.

"Unlike Smee, however," Mr. Gold continued, "you've never cheated me. You're welcome to strike a new bargain. To tell you the truth, I'd made the deal in the first place with the expectation of renegotiating at a future time."

Slowly, Dr. Hopper raised his head to look at Mr. Gold. "Renegotiating? You mean they—they didn't have to stay wooden?"

"My potion was designed to render its recipients inanimate, not dead. I'd thought that after one night of guilt you'd come running to me, begging to have your mum and dad back. Imagine my surprise when I followed your trace to that cottage and found—not your troublesome parents—but these two strangers."

Clamping his umbrella to his chest, Dr. Hopper mumbled, "My parents. They—they were pulling the fairy potion con on—one a young peasant couple. They—they switched the bottles."

Mr. Gold chuckled. "Ah. Your parents were sly ones, weren't they?" If ever there were an example of perverted true love, surely the doctor's parents were it. He swept his hand toward the wooden
figures. "If I'd known their names, I could have reanimated them to human form—as if nothing had ever happened. Imagine my greater surprise when I lost your trace on a fence rail and couldn't ask you."

Dr. Hopper banged his umbrella against his forehead. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. You told me you'd collect them, but I—I was too ashamed to seek you out. Damn me. All you needed was—was their names?"

"And a price. You were an excellent sneak thief. Your parents taught you well. I'd have asked you for a favor."

Dr. Hopper dashed up to Mr. Gold and leaned forward to earnestly search his face. "They're Geppetto's mother and father, Stephen and Donna Polendina. If you make them human again, I'll steal anything—anything you want."

"I said could have—back when I had my full powers."

"But—but you re-attached Dr. Whale's arm."

*And my price was hearing him admit he needed magic.* Gold leaned heavily on his cane. "I restored one piece of living flesh to its rightful place. That's the first trick I ever learned, useful on the battlefield or for repairing woodcutters' mishaps. The magic I've found in this world is but a shadow of the magic I had in that world. Inanimate isn't dead but it isn't living either. Before I try transforming lifeless back to life, I need to experiment on—" he caught himself before saying *insects* "—something less significant than Geppetto's parents."

"Time!" Dr. Hopper grimaced and turned to the marionettes. "Damn me. If only renegotiation had occurred to me—occurred to me the night I did this to you! If you turn back now, would you be happy? Your son... he's old enough to be your—your grandfather!"

Mr. Gold reached out, hesitated, then patted Dr. Hopper on the leather padded elbow of his tweed jacket. "I have their names. That's a start. At least in Storybrooke they'd find they're no longer peasants. And that royals are no longer royals. If I were them, I'd find that advantage enough to make up for many lost years."

Mr. Gold located an empty satin-lined box in which Dr. Hopper could protect the marionettes. No point in displaying them now—particularly when their no longer amnesic son Geppetto could be the next Storybrooke citizen to visit the pawnshop.

Mr. Gold watched Dr. Hopper cradle the box out of his showroom into his office. Assured that he was alone, he limped to the cabinet Smee had been rifling. *What was he looking for?* His bell rang again. Not bothering to turn, he called out, "Appointments only." Grasping his cane, he tentatively lowered himself—handhold by handhold—to crouch beside the jumble of weapons in the display cabinet.

"I want my guitar back."

*If it's a demand, it must be a royal.* Awkwardly, Mr. Gold craned his head back to glower at Prince Thomas. "You pawned it. That transaction falls under this world's rules. Until you repay what you owe, your collateral stays." Gritting his teeth, he began the slow process of pulling himself back up his cane. When Thomas took a step forward, hand out as if to help, Mr. Gold shot him a murderous *Don't you dare* look.

Thomas dropped his hand to his side. "I need my guitar today. I'm a man of honor. If you understood
Incensed, Mr. Gold planted his cane firmly in front of him. "Understood honor? Then I'd what? Let you challenge me to a duel?"

"Whoa. Wait a minute. I never said—"

"Well, I've never been a man of honor, dearie. My code is equity. In exchange for your guitar, I loaned you the money for an engagement ring—much more than your instrument is worth. But if fighting for honor is the only code you understand, I'm more than ready to oblige." Shifting his cane to his right hand, he lifted his left.

Mr. Gold watched the prince's boyish smile fade as he saw the ball of fire forming on his adversary's outstretched palm. Satisfied, Mr. Gold tipped his head toward the still open door. Before he could say Leave, another uninvited visitor stepped through it.

Prince Charming. That's all I need. With a pfft, he stubbed out the magical flame. "Sheriff—Acting Sheriff—kindly escort this young man to the street."

"What's this about a fight?"

Mr. Gold watched Charming stroll into his shop and stop, shoulder-to-shoulder, beside his good friend Thomas—another tall, young, buff, fresh-faced Lord of Creation. Mr. Gold scowled. Behind him, he heard Dr. Hopper shamble back into the showroom. Predictably, the counselor interjected, "I'm sure together we can settle things... settle things peacefully."

Thomas held up a placating hand. "I only meant, if you understood how important this is to me—to play my guitar at Ella's birthday party—you'd know you can trust me to bring it back in the morning."

"Well, that—that seems reasonable—" Hopper began.

Mr. Gold cut him off with a snort. "Trust you and Ella? The last time I did, you enlisted his—" he jerked his thumb at Charming "—and Snow's help to lock me up for half a year in a cold dank cell."

"Come on, Mr. Gold," Charming said. "We've all agreed. Different worlds, different rules."

Thomas beamed an enchanting smile. "And don't forget. I spent half a year as a frog."

"Half a year? Hah." Mr. Gold jiggled his head. "It's not my fault you couldn't get Ella to kiss you."

Thomas spread out his hands. "Is it my fault I was bending over a well to fetch her a drink when you changed me? I spent half a year at the bottom of a cold dank cell, too. I'd say we're even."

"Would you, dearie?" Picturing the predicament the prince had described, Mr. Gold found himself chuckling. "For the old world, yes, we're even. But in this world, I still require collateral for a loan."

Ruby hurried up the block to the diner, running her fingers through her long chestnut hair. She could already hear Granny: Late Again. If you want to take over when I die, you have to learn to be reliable.

Ruby bit her lip. Since Emma had broken the Storybrooke curse and restarted time ticking, death had become a real prospect again. But not for Granny, not for ages.

As she strode along, Ruby peeked into her breast pocket. Her wolf charm continued glowing. Still
reacting to my stuff. The lock and key she'd stashed in her fringed leather carryall. The crossbow and quiver she'd tucked under her arm. These days, she'd seen stranger talismans toted around Storybrooke.

Ruby skipped the last couple of steps before turning into the diner's picket fenced front patio. She grinned at Dave the Dove sipping a yogurt smoothie, all six-feet-going-on-seven of him perched on a tiny metal stool. He doffed his chauffeur's cap as she passed.

When Ruby slipped into the diner, she sidestepped to the corner to hang up her puffy red jacket. Granny was flipping a hamburger sizzling on the grill. Pre-lunch business was slow—just Walter perched at the counter and Mrs. Blue lounging in a booth. Maybe if she was quiet her tardiness would go unnoticed.

No such luck. Ruby cringed when Granny shot her a disapproving glance. "Late again."

"And if I want to take over this place when yada-yada-yada." With her widest smile, Ruby held up Granny's childhood present to her. "Look what I found."

Instead of smiling, Granny glowered. "You went to Gold's. After I said you'd be wasting your time."

Ruby rolled her eyes, skirted the cash register, and crouched to stow her handbag and treasures in the cabinet beneath. On her way back up, she grabbed a bar cloth and busily mopped the counter. "Mr. Gold's shop was the most likely place for the thing to be."

"But he didn't have the thing, did he?"

"No. And you don't have to sound so smug." You'd almost think Granny was happy I didn't find my charmed red hood. Reaching Walter, Ruby noted he'd propped his forehead on his hands and his elbows on the counter. Sound asleep—again. When she tried to clean around him, his soft snore became a gasp.

"I'm not sleeping. I'm not."

Ruby cocked her head. "Leroy had you guys up early again."

"Five a.m., and we still haven't struck fairy diamonds." Walter rubbed his eyes. "Now I've got a shift at the hospital."

Pushing in beside Ruby, Granny handed Walter his oversized thermos. "Extra strong, extra sweet, just like you like it."

Walter nodded, dropped a tenner, yawned, and slid off his stool. As the miner-slash-security-guard neared the door, it swept open. When Ruby recognized the new customer, her smile faded. District Attorney Albert Spencer damn-his-smirk King George. Before the curse broke, he'd never graced the diner with his presence. Now that he remembered who he was and who she was, he came regularly. Evidently, he enjoyed having the warrior who had helped Charming oust him from his throne wait on his table.

"I'm still assembling Mrs. Blue's bacon cheeseburger," Granny whispered. "Your turn to handle George."

Ruby sighed as the ex-monarch took command of the corner booth. Putting on her perkiest grin, she sauntered over. "May I—"

"Take my order? What could be more fitting?"
"I'm not your damned subject. Not anymore. Still smiling, Ruby pulled her pencil from behind her ear. "Yes?"

"Lasagna—unless it'll take Granny too long to defrost." King George leaned back. "And make it to go."

"Certainly." To go is our favorite way to bring your lunch.

But as Ruby turned to leave, George grabbed her wrist. "I expect tonight will be your last evening shift for a few days. Tomorrow is the first night of the full moon. Are you really going to rely on camping?"

Ruby stared at him. Camping? How could he know what she had planned?

The day the curse broke, Ruby had tried to summon the wolf in her just to see if she could. In the Enchanted Forest, she'd learned to control her transformation at will. Her enchanted red cloak had become more of a failsafe backup.

But when she tested her abilities in Storybrooke, the result was… nothing.

For weeks, Ruby had put the subject out of her mind. She and Granny had had enough to do, managing the quadrupled business they'd enjoyed since Storybrooke decided the diner was the perfect spot for tear-soaked reunions, gossip sessions, strategic planning, and bitch fests.

But as the icons on the wall calendar showed the moon phases nearing full, Ruby had begun to wonder: was it just her ability to control her shape-shifting that had disappeared? When the three days of Wolfstime occurred in a town with magic, would she lose herself once more in the ravening beast?

Before Ruby could respond, Granny was at her side. "What do you mean camping?"

At Granny's glare, George released his grip. "Merely some friendly advice that your granddaughter's arrangements should be more secure. If a birdwatcher rises early or, heaven forbid, the nuns take the orphans on a nature trip, I'd hate to have to put such a lovely young woman on trial for murder."

Granny plunked down a frozen lasagna carton. "Here. On the house. Take it to your office and pop it in the microwave."

Picking up the box, George slid down the bench. "I'd suspected this was your secret recipe. Hope you don't lose too many customers when word gets out."

Granny snorted. "Who's going to believe you?"

The door opened, and Billy entered, tall and slim in his tow truck coveralls. Meeting his warm chocolate eyes, Ruby felt her tension melt. According to the back story implanted by the curse, they'd been childhood lovebirds—until high school when she'd become a complete slut. Since the curse had broken, she'd crossed paths with at least a dozen men who made her uncomfortable. Though false, her memories of their previous encounters seemed embarrassingly real. With Billy, her imaginary past was strictly sweet.

When Ruby smiled, she saw George eyeing her.

"Ladies, always a pleasure having you serve me." He rose to his feet. Passing Billy, he added, "and good day to you, mouse boy."
"What did you call me?"

Without another word, George strolled out the door, his microwaveable lasagna in one hand, his briefcase swinging from the other.

"Good riddance," Granny muttered.

Mouse boy? Before Ruby could ask, Billy posed his own question. "What's that glow?"

Looking down, Ruby saw red light radiating from her breast pocket. As she stared, it died away. But not before her grandmother noticed. "Gold better not have cast any dark spells for you. Magic always comes with a price."

Yes, Ruby said to herself. A couple of anecdotes for a lonely man about the woman he lost.

Chapter End Notes

After the curse broke, I expected to see a follow up for Geppetto's parents. There's even an unused shot of Hopper walking by Mr. Gold's shop and seeing them in the window (and of course, I can't find the link). I thought Rumplestiltskin must have had something more complex in mind before the Blue Fairy butted in.
More Than Just a Book

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold is promised his books.

Charming enjoys his job.

Emma faces a climb.

A damsel faces distress.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marco (Geppetto): I thought I would find my boy. (We Are Both)

As Charming shepherded Thomas out of the shop, Mr. Gold stared at the blades heaped in the showcase. What did Smee say he was looking for? He can't possibly know about the Dark One's dagger, can he? He pointed at the lock and opened it.

Walking up behind him, Charming interrupted his thoughts with, "That was cold."

"Was it?" Mr. Gold twisted his hand to snap the lock shut then swung around on his cane. "Maybe in the Enchanted Forest, all Prince Thomas had to do was be charming, and he'd get anything he wanted. Here he must learn what we peasants have always known: acquiring anything takes negotiation and hard work."

Hopper joined them. "Be fair. Thomas has pulled double shifts at the—the cannery for the last year. And Ella—Ella was pregnant for twenty-nine years. They've—they've hardly had it easy."

Charming raised his chin, looking down his nose at Mr. Gold. "And you tried to take their baby."

"Did I, dearie? And what do you think I'd have done with her? Eaten her in a stew? Skinned her to make a pair of gloves? Juggled her? Pish tosh. My deals where babies are concerned have meant many things, but never anything bad. Some I've placed in better situations. Your twin brother was raised as a prince because of one of my deals. And your mum and dad got their own farm on which to raise you. I'd have found a similar good situation for Ella's baby here in Storybrooke if Thomas hadn't manned up to his responsibilities. Other babies I've tutored—once they were old enough to appreciate my instruction."

"Tutored? I'd hate to ask in what," Charming said.

Mr. Gold smiled sweetly. "Nothing you'd have had the brains to comprehend, dearie. As far as Mr. and Mrs. Prince Thomas are concerned, I'd have asked for a favor. And for their spoiled little princess to grow up knowing she owed it to me. As it stands, it's your baby that owes me that favor."

Charming sighed. "Something Emma will never repay if she's there and we're here."

Mr. Gold grimaced. "I'm working on it," he muttered.
"Working on it? I didn't come today just to hear that again. I know about Dr. Whale's arm."

"And that I was practicing medicine without a license? Slap on the handcuffs, Acting Sheriff."

Charming folded his arms. "In the last five minutes, I've seen you do two more tricks by flicking your wrist. If you can do all that, why can't you re-open the portal to bring my wife and child back from the Enchanted Forest?"

*If it's a demand, it must be a royal.* "I spent nearly two-hundred-and-fifty years getting from the Enchanted Forest to here. And it took Emma another twenty-eight. Finding a way back for your family shouldn't take that long, but you can't expect me to accomplish it in less than twenty-eight days."

"One second longer than it needs to take is one second too many." Charming paused. "You told me you needed research material. Would it help to learn your magic library ended up in the Storybrooke library—boxed up on the second floor? Belle stumbled across it the other day. Regina admitted she put it there."

_Belle found my books._ Mr. Gold looked aside before Charming could see his excitement. "Everything of any significance from the Enchanted Forest ended up in my shop—except that." With an airy wave of his hand, he turned away. "If Regina was so anxious to appropriate my library for herself, she must have had a good reason. Why don't you ask her to help you?"

"I did. She said your books are in languages she doesn't understand. And besides..."

"Besides what?" Mr. Gold turned to face him. "You don't trust her."

"To bring back the two women she hates most in all the known universes? No, not really."

"Actually," Dr. Hopper butted in, "Regina doesn't—doesn't trust herself. As she said at the last town hall, she's given up magic. So she won't—won't harm someone. Accidentally."

"Yes, yes. She's working her program." Mr. Gold rolled his eyes. I give it a month. "And yet Charming trusts me. I'm touched."

"Matter of fact, I don't. But I trust your deals. You can have your books if you agree to spend this week scouring them for a way to reach Emma and Snow."

"You're bargaining with me? For my own property?" Affronted, Mr. Gold rapped his cane on the floor. "I may have plucked you out of the peasantry, dearie, but you've certainly proved yourself a royal. Don't I have the right to my books the same as everyone has the right to recover their possessions from my shop? Or is it one set of rules for the favored and another for the disfavored?"

Charming stood his ground. "Fine. Give me a detailed description of each individual book. If I can identify it, I'll bring it to you. One by one. At three-day intervals. Or agree to my terms and have all of them now."

*My books are on the second floor. Belle's apartment is on the second floor.* To maintain his guise of nonchalance, Mr. Gold counted to ten. Then he said, "If you insist. I could carve out some time to come to the library."

"Come to the library?" Charming shook his head. "Not acceptable. That would be uncomfortable—for Belle."

Mr. Gold blinked. *Uncomfortable.* Was that how Belle felt about seeing him again? "Indeed. I—I
hadn't considered that. You're perfectly correct."

Charming's cell phone buzzed. Pulling it from his jeans pocket, he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Bring my books here before six... if that won't inconvenience Belle." Mr. Gold coughed, hoping to release the sudden tightness in his throat. "I'll spend a week scouring them... We have a deal."

* * * * *

Seated again in the Sheriff's cruiser, Charming took the time to fasten his seat belt. All things considered, this job was pretty satisfying. Not only did he get to stop bar fights at the Rabbit Hole, determine the facts of runaway ore cart incidents, and issue traffic tickets to the likes of King George, he was also the last word when it came to protecting damsels from experiencing even a moment of distress.

Back in the Enchanted Forest, he'd required a fairy-dust fortified dungeon to restrain the Dark One. Here in Storybrooke, all he had to do was state his opinion and the evil wizard had backed down.

Entirely and utterly satisfying.

Charming pulled out his cell phone again. Just a quick call to Magic Carpet Truckers to arrange moving Rumplestiltskin's crates, and then he'd respond to Ursula Oso's 911. He had a pretty good idea of who had filched her family's porridge.

* * * * *

My books. Mr. Gold rested on his cane. Somewhere, in some long-lost volume, surely, he'd discover the secret of how to break the spell that surrounded Storybrooke with a borderline of forgetfulness. Once he accomplished that he could leave and find his son Baelfire—without forgetting who he was looking for. And, yes, how to pull Emma and Mary-Margaret back to Storybrooke—he'd uncover that secret, too. If he could turn the power of magic toward good—reclaim the aspiration he'd voiced to Bae a quarter of a millennium before—then maybe, just maybe, Belle would reconsider her decision to never see him again and agree to, perhaps, share hamburgers sometime.

He glanced up at Dr. Hopper. "If I remember correctly, one particularly ratty old volume contains everything there is to know about the art of transformation. Time has passed, but it's never too late to reunite a son with his mama and papa." When the counselor didn't smile, Mr. Gold frowned. "You didn't come about Geppetto's parents."

Dr. Hopper shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"You came," Mr. Gold said softly, "about his son."

"Yes." Dr. Hopper groaned. "Pinocchio. He's—he's returning to his wooden state. He's nearly inanimate—like those two." He stared at the silent marionettes.

Not quite. Mr. Gold closed his eyes to think. This used to come so easily. Transformation. Transmogrification. Transmutation. Ahh! He opened his eyes. "Actually, Pinocchio's state is not like those two. You said nearly."

Dr. Hopper hunched his shoulders. "He can blink. He can move his jaw. But he can't speak. He can no longer—no longer raise his hand from the blankets. The Blue Fairy. She told me—"

Reul Gorm. That bitch. If it weren't for her, I'd never have been separated from Baelfire in the first place. "It was her spell that animated Pinocchio, wasn't it? Well that makes the solution to his current
problem even simpler to understand. Strip away her sanctimonious tripe about the perils of lying and disobedience and he'll stop fading away."

Dr. Hopper's eyes widened behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "Do you really think so?"

Mr. Gold nodded. "Pinocchio lies to get his way. Neglects his responsibilities to have fun. Then he feels really bad about his behavior and tries to make it up to everyone. What could be more human than that? With the proper spell, we can fan that spark of humanity back into a flame, burn away the wood, and make him a real man again." *Belle will be pleased and Reul Gorm will be livid—two lovely outcomes with one deed.* He drew a deep, satisfying breath. "This task I can do. Expect me at Geppetto's by six."

"Tonight?" Dr. Hopper's pinched expression said the news was too good to be true. "But what about your deal with Charming? Shouldn't you be concentrating on—on how to open a portal?"

Mr. Gold waved his hand. "Unlike Pinocchio, Emma and Mary-Margaret can wait. They're not in danger of becoming inert. More likely, they're strolling the old palace gardens having a pleasant mother-daughter chat. Trust me. They're fine."

* * * * *

Just before dark, Emma stood with Mulan, Aurora, and Mary-Margaret, studying the face of a cliff. "If we reach those ledges, we can have a good night's sleep safely hidden from Hook, Cora, her zombies, and the ogres." Mulan's manner said she'd assessed the situation rationally and reached the best tactical conclusion.

Emma had come to trust her. She tipped her head to one side. "I've always liked high rises. But an elevator would be nice." The crevices the soldier was pointing out appeared to be at least six stories up.

"Elevator?" Mulan asked.

"Hard to explain," Mary-Margaret replied.

Emma glanced at Aurora. As always, any plan had to take into account their weakest link. "You're going to have to strip down to your corset and panties. You can't risk getting tripped up in your princess robes on a climb like this."

Aurora laughed nervously. "Don't worry. I'm not risking the climb at all."

"You have to," Mulan said in her usual no-nonsense way.

"Not in your dreams," Aurora answered. "Or mine either, for that matter."

"Emma and I will go first and pull you up," Mary-Margaret said. "I knew rope would come in handy."

From the far end of the canyon, Emma heard the faint rumble of awakening ogres.

"We need to be camped up there by nightfall," Mulan advised.

Running her gaze up the jagged rock, Emma scouted a zigzagging ladder of cracks and bumps that reached the ledges. *Okay. I can do this.* For luck, she kissed the compass hanging from her neck—the enchanted instrument the lonely giant had given her after she'd revealed why she needed it. *To
find my way home to Henry... once I find the means to get there. She stuck it inside her jacket, fastened all the zippers, then reached for the first handhold and began clambering upwards.

"As easy as climbing a beanstalk," she called out to her friends. So long as I don't look down.

* * * * *

Just after dark, Belle sat at the circulation desk staring at the bald-headed mover. This time ten crates sat atop the cart he was pushing off the elevator. At this rate, Rumple's entire collection would be out of the library by Children's Story Hour. He certainly didn't waste any time removing his things from my keeping.

Belle closed her eyes a moment, took a deep breath, then returned to her stack of reference requests. Does earth have a story about a bird with burning feathers, a grey wolf, and a princess named Helene? She'd already determined the answer didn't involve a phoenix, but she had yet to narrow her search any further. This will be easier after Henry shows me how to use the computer.

Hearing rattling, Belle turned her head to see the freckle-faced mover trundling his hand truck back through the front doors. Ready for a new load. She watched the two men maneuver around each other. Before she had time for another sigh, Leroy entered the library.

Seeing his somber, bearded face, Belle smiled. One of the happiest moments of the past three weeks had been finding her Enchanted Forest friend alive and well—but it had been one of the saddest, too. When she'd confessed she wasn't with her true love, he'd replied, Same here. That's when she'd discovered the dwarf miner Dreamy was now called Grumpy.

"Hey, Belle. I've got an ad to post." Leroy walked up and handed her a multi-colored poster. By earth definitions, he wasn't a dwarf, but he was short enough to rest his elbows on the circulation counter without stooping.

"Hmm. 'This Friday, Storybrooke Concert for the Kids. Food, Games, Crafts. Fun for all ages. Proceeds benefit the Sisters of Eternal Purity St. Meissa Home for Lost Children.'" Belle tilted her head to one side. "The children's home. Nova works there, doesn't she?"

"Here, her name is Sister Astrid." Leroy pulled his beard. "Stop grinning, Belle. I always help out at the convent's charity events."

"Because you're a good guy, yes, but also because you like seeing Nova." When Leroy didn't object, Belle continued. "Now you know she's not really a nun, and she's no longer a fairy. Doesn't that make her... an opportunity?"

Leroy's mouth quivered as if he were suppressing a grin. Finally, he muttered. "We'll see."

"Hmm." Belle pointed at the library's bulletin board. "Hang it in the center."

Leroy started to turn then looked back. "Papageno and Papagena are looking for a singer for their act. I told them I'd ask---"

"You can't be serious. That time you heard me in the tavern, I was drunk." Dwarf rum. Belle felt queasy just thinking about it.

"And you sounded wonderful. Think how great you'll sound sober."

"Dream on, Dreamy."
Leroy shrugged. "Think about it." Taking his poster, he ambled over to the bulletin board.

Belle refocused on her index of French fairytales. When she heard another cartload rumble off the elevator, she kept her eyes resolutely on her page. She recalled the words Rumple had quoted when she'd first explored the boarded-up library and found him waiting to say goodbye: *We may sit in our library and yet be in all quarters of the earth.* Well, now he could sit in his library again—without her hanging around bothering him. With his books as guidance, he could regain the powers that had eluded him since he'd brought magic to Storybrooke. Unbidden, her bleakest memory of the Dark Castle echoed in her mind, Rumplestiltskin's last words before kicking her out: *It's quite simple, really. My power means more to me than you.*

"Hi, Belle."

*Henry.* Taking a deep breath, Belle looked up into his friendly face. "You're here. Good. I have—" she glanced at the wall clock "—forty minutes before Story Hour. Is that enough time to teach me how to do an Internet search?"

"Yup." The skin beneath Henry's eyes looked smudged as if he needed a nap, but his smile was eager.

When Belle had first asked about the strange contraptions set up along the library's back wall, the description had alarmed her. She'd seen with Rumple what magic could do to people. Then Henry had clarified the difference. The ability to communicate with nearly anyone upon the face of the earth held its own dangers, but it wasn't magic.

"I'm ready." Belle felt certain Henry could help her identify which story included both a fiery bird and a grey wolf. After he showed her how searches worked, she'd be able to answer her own burning question: *What's Stockholm syndrome?*

Chapter End Notes

I love writing a story from multiple points-of-view that contradict each other, keep secrets from each other, and particularly when the characters wrongly do what they think best for each other.
What You Seek

Chapter Summary

What does Mr. Gold hide under a rustic basket? What book does Granny need from the library? What's in Smee's rusty biscuit tin? What's making that eerie rumbling in the Enchanted Forest?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Regina (The Evil Queen): Give me the book. (We Are Both)

Leaning on his cane, Mr. Gold stared at the bastion of crates—three-hundred-and-thirty-six stacked seven high, two deep, and twenty-four long across two walls. To unpack all the books they held, he'd have to knock out the ceiling and incorporate the attic, make his back office as tall as the tower library in his Enchanted Forest estate. Wouldn't that be grand?

He waggled his head. But not appropriate for Storybrooke. Come morning, he had to at least sort out the volumes pertaining to the subjects of current interest—realm jumping, transformation, and forgetfulness.

The second floor of the public library has room to unpack my collection. That Belle didn't want him there—apparently, couldn't clear out his belongings fast enough—left a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The bleakest moment of the brief weeks they'd shared in Storybrooke hung in Mr. Gold’s memory, Belle's last words before rejecting him: You're too cowardly to be honest with me. That word, coward, had been pinned on him over two-hundred-and-fifty years before, and it had clung to him ever since. But wasn't discretion the better part of valor? If he knew that opening the secrets of his dark past would destroy her love, wasn't avoiding revelations just common sense?

Despite himself, Mr. Gold felt his attention drawn to the rustic basket tipped upside down on the top shelf. Did the bottle he'd hidden beneath it still shine? Or had its delicate flame died out at last?

The night he'd broached the possibility of bottling their true love, Belle had been cuddling in his arms. He'd tried to make it sound like a casual, playful lark. Naturally, she'd seen right through him.

You'd consider it a test, wouldn't you? Well, I refuse to indulge your fears. The only way we can find happiness is if we have faith in our love. I trust that you want me. You have to trust I want you, too.

The next day Belle was gone.

That evening Mr. Gold had retrieved one auburn hair from Belle's pillow and one brown hair from his own. His hand had trembled so badly, he'd barely managed to drop them in the bottle. But when they touched the medium, they'd turned to gold. Then they'd danced. A purple light had suffused the liquid as iridescent bubbles began to swirl. The potion was so beautiful, he'd gazed at it for hours.

In the weeks since, he'd taken to hiding the bottle from himself—just so he could get some work done. Finally, he'd set a strict limit of one viewing per day. So far, every time he'd looked, he'd found
their true love magic burning bright.

Mr. Gold gripped his cane as he stared at the top shelf. Was today the day he'd find a cold, brown sludge?

Setting his jaw, he jerked his hand as if tearing a bandage from a wound. The basket spun across the ceiling, smashing against the opposite wall. He focused on the bottle. Then he closed his eyes. Purple, sparkling, effervescent—their potion looked magnificent.

For now.

The Charming family's true love continued to permeate Storybrooke—as strong and stable as the day he'd bottled it. And he was certain it would remain so.

The prince might not be the cleverest of men, but his heart never wavered. The day Belle had left, Mr. Gold had asked Charming, *You and Mary-Margaret? How does that work?* Despite his vast knowledge of the complex forces that ran the universes, that was a mystery he'd never unlocked—how two people in love managed to also get along.

*I'm no good for Belle.* He knew that. And he knew that was where his duty of love lay—in letting her go, in staying apart, in allowing her to find her happiness without him.

Pivoting on his cane, Mr. Gold scanned the two sets of shelves not hidden by crates. Spying a top hat with a busted crown, he flicked his wrist to sail it to the high shelf and settle it over the bottle. Then he crooked a finger to summon a smaller, less dazzling potion vial and tucked it away in his pinstriped suit. He'd promised Dr. Hopper to resolve Pinocchio's dilemma—and he would—but he had his own reasons for visiting, a couple of questions that only the wooden man could answer.

“What kind of book do we need?” Ruby glanced at Granny and cleared her throat. “Metal work.”

As much as Ruby hated to agree with King George, she knew hiding in the woods tomorrow night was not a surefire way to stop her from snacking on her fellow citizens. She needed to be chained.

“I’m sure we have just the thing.” Belle led Ruby and Granny to the card catalog. “What kind of metal work? Smithing would be under Technology, but jewelry or sculpting would be under Arts.”

“Welding.” Granny said. “I need to know how to use a blowtorch.”

“Hm.” If Belle had questions, her face didn’t betray them. She opened a drawer, flipped cards, and plucked out one. “This should fit what you’re looking for: a beginner’s guide. Follow me.”

Ruby and Granny trailed Belle out of the main reading room, down a linoleum-tiled hall, and into a side room.

Belle scanned numbers up and down the steel book racks then pointed to a thick paperback with a yellow spine. “Do you mind?”

“No problem.” Ruby reached over her friend’s head and pulled the volume from the top shelf: *Welding for Dummies.* She tried not to smirk as she handed it to Granny.

Her grandmother wasn’t insulted. “Perfect. Thank you, Belle. So glad you’re taking to your new life.”

Belle shrugged. “Well, it’s not my first experience looking after a library. Back in the Enchanted
“Stop,” Granny said. “No need to dredge up awful memories.”

Belle blinked. “My memories aren’t—”

“Just thank your lucky stars you’re here now.” Before Belle could respond, Granny turned to Ruby. “You open up for the dinner crowd, and I’ll call around for the equipment.”

“Sure, I’ll just—”

Ruby let her words trail off as her grandmother bustled out the door. She shot Belle a commiserating glance. Granny never waited for her to finish her sentences either.

One side of Belle's mouth pinched in a smile. “Glad I could help.”

“See you,” Ruby said and rushed after Granny. Behind her, she heard Belle sigh.

Smee squeezed the spray handle on the hose to squirt the shelves of houseplants. If Moe had been away from Game of Thorns, Smee would have made quick work of it. But since his boss was watching, he had to be careful not to splash the cutesy display cards—Spectacular Spathiphyllum, Delightful Dieffenbachia, Comforting Castanospermum.

Glancing at his boss, Smee caught him touching his hard-to-find biscuit tin. He whipped around, spraying the wall before remembering to release the handle. "Hey, don't open that."

Moe looked at him askance. "I wouldn't want to. Just get it out of sight so customers don't think it's for sale. Whatever's inside must be rotten."

Smee nodded. You have no idea.

When he'd first heard the box's juicy secrets, he'd thought he'd lucked out. Finally, he had something valuable enough to trade for a second childhood. But luckily for him, the Dark One had blown him off. His mere attempt to find a better offer had made the box displeased.

Tentatively, Smee touched the burn on his cheek. Still painful. Who'd have thought such a rusty old box could hold such a powerful white light?

Moe wrestled on his heavy jacket and grabbed the zippered banker's bag with the day's earnings. "I'm making a deposit. Can you lock up after you bring the displays inside? Oh, and take the trash to the curb."

"You've got it, boss." Smee turned off the faucet and hung up the hose. Smiling, he ambled over to the biscuit tin. Oh, he'd take the trash to the curb, all right. He wondered how displeased the box would be when it found itself on the way to the dump.

Mr. Gold labored up the steep winding staircase that led to the eagle's nest third floor of Geppetto's dockside home. Above him, the elderly woodcarver was running to the top for the fourth time. Beneath him, he heard Dr. Hopper take another step, then pause patiently while Mr. Gold planted his good foot on the stair above him, slid his hand up the rail, repositioned his cane, and dragged up his bad leg.

I'm pitiful, he said to himself.
Yet again, he heard Geppetto scamper down the stairs. The kind whiskered face peeked around the corner and beamed down at him. "Almost there." Then the old man raced back up.

Mr. Gold heaved himself onto the next step. "How long has Pinocchio been here?"

"Only since yesterday," Dr. Hopper answered behind him.

"Indeed," Mr. Gold replied. "Where was he before?"

"In the forest. We—we were lucky to find him. Pongo caught his scent."

*Hopper's dalmatian caught Pinocchio's scent?* With his next hop, Mr. Gold rounded the turn and saw the top landing with Geppetto backlit in the bedroom doorway, waving to him. "What kind of wood is he made of that Pongo could differentiate him from the trees?"

Mr. Gold managed five more stairs before Dr. Hopper responded. "Well, it wasn't the scent of wood Pongo caught. Apparently… another dog marked him."

Mr. Gold snickered the rest of the way to the top.

A low growl reverberated through the canyon walls. *The ogres are out in force this evening,* Emma thought and wedged herself as far as she could into the rock fissure. It was her turn to sleep while her Mom kept watch on the outer edge, and she wanted to leave as much room as possible. If Mary-Margaret snoozed off, the drop down was terrifying.

Not that she could sleep with her empty stomach rumbling and the ogres howling.

On the rock shelf below, Aurora whimpered. Was she having one of her nightmares again? Ironic that having been under a sleeping curse would have such a disturbing effect on ever sleeping soundly again. "Are you okay?" Emma whispered.

Above her, Mulan breathed, "Don't wake her. An uneasy rest is better than no rest."

In the distance, an ogre shrieked.

"Who could sleep through that?" Emma muttered.

She sensed rather than saw her mother look back over her shoulder. "We're safe here, darling. Close your eyes."

*Not likely.* Nearly a month, and she still couldn't get used to the night sounds of the Enchanted Forest. "How could you have fond memories of this world? It's awful."

"You mean the ogres?" Mary-Margaret sighed. "They didn't used to be like this. At least, not in my lifetime. A year or so before the curse, one town fell to them—Avonlea. But that wasn't typical. I'd never seen an ogre myself until the night we fell through the portal."

"Really? Then how did you know—"

"Where to shoot the arrow? Target practice. When I was a child, if I hit the straw ogre in the eye, I got a lollipop."

From the ledge above, Emma heard a muffled *harrumph.* "For a soldier," Mulan whispered, "not hitting the target in the eye meant a flogging. As part of our training, we were also taken to observe them—from a great distance. We never shot at them, or we'd endanger the truce."
"Truce?" Emma asked. "With ogres?" I didn't think they had a language. She heard rustling from below.

"Yes, truce," Aurora murmured. "My great-great-great-great-great-grandfather King Cedric decreed it."

Above her, Mulan harrumphed again. Emma heard Mary-Margaret chuckle, then whisper down to Aurora. "That's just the usual palace history. In other words, lies. According to my schoolbooks, it was my ancestor King Anthony that put the truce in place."

"It wasn't a king," Mulan whispered. "It was an imp. A magical being with special skills and absolutely no fear: Rumplestiltskin."

"Rumplestiltskin?" Emma repeated. "Isn't that—"

"Mr. Gold, yes," Mary-Margaret answered. "That's the true story."

Emma exhaled slowly. "Mr. Gold. I might've known. If anyone could strike a deal with ogres, it's—"

A snarl high above cut her short. Aurora squealed. Immediately, gravel rained down and Mary-Margaret scooted backwards into the crevice. Emma hugged her close.

The clatter of falling rocks continued. Then Emma heard a new sound—a kind of scrabbling.

"I think the ogre is trying to reach down," Mary-Margaret breathed.

Emma swallowed. Mulan had situated them too high for an ogre to snatch them from below. Had she also made sure they were far enough down?

"Mulan!" Aurora wailed. "Don't leave me alone!"

"Shhh!" Emma, Mary-Margaret, and Mulan hushed in chorus.

The rock shower stopped, replaced by snuffling. Emma bit her lip. None of us has bathed in a week. He can smell us.

"Aurora's ledge is deeper," Mulan said at last. "I'm coming down to join her."

Mulan's boot dipped into view. Emma secured one arm around a stone outcropping and her other around her mother. "Help her."

Mary-Margaret clasped Mulan around her legs and let her slip through, down to her armpits. Then she lowered her.

"Oh, thank you," Aurora gasped as Mulan got her footing below.

A rock clunked on Mulan's helmet. Then she wriggled from Mary-Margaret's arms and out of sight.

A sharp crack sounded above her, and Emma hugged Mary-Margaret tighter. Then a torrent of rocks and choking dust cascaded down.

"These ledges," her Mom whispered. "They're just the right size for ogre handholds."

Without speaking further, Emma released Mary-Margaret. Both women drew their blades.
I was surprised Mr. Gold was never shown making love potion from his and Belle's hair, though I did catch sight of a purple bottle stashed in his safe once.
Do You Know the Rules?

Chapter Summary

Emma faces ogres.

Pinocchio faces Mr. Gold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Dark One (Rumplestiltskin/Mr. Gold): Good! That's going to save us time during the question and answer portion of our game. (The Crocodile)

Leaning heavily on his cane, aching and tired from his steep climb, Mr. Gold peered around Pinocchio's dimly lit bedroom. The attic chamber was a wee lad's paradise—fierce dragons and feckless knights carved into the paneling, a wooden train running around a high shelf, whittled astronauts and dinosaurs scattered across the floor.

Mr. Gold wondered if the curse that created Storybrooke had prepared for Pinocchio's presence and been cheated when Geppetto had hidden his son in the magical wardrobe and sent him ahead of the curse with Emma.

Sighing, Mr. Gold gestured to one of the child-sized stools—"If you would be so kind"—and waited while Geppetto arranged it next to his boy's bed.

Gratefully, Mr. Gold lowered himself onto it, propped his cane against the nightstand, and slid the stool closer to Pinocchio. He noted with amusement that the wooden man's nose was at least a foot long.

"Can you hear me? Blink once for yes. Good. If your answer to any of my questions is ever no, blink twice."

The wooden lids over the painted staring eyes blinked once.

"Do you feel better this evening?"

One blink and the nose grew longer.

"I'm here to help. You trust me, don't you?"

Pinocchio blinked once for yes, but his telltale nose shot out a full inch.

Mr. Gold chuckled. Then he swiveled to face Geppetto and Dr. Hopper. "I'm going to ask our young friend some very personal questions. Right now, lying is deleterious to his health. He'll be less likely to do that if he's not surrounded by his loved ones. When I'm done, I'll rap my cane on the floor."

Geppetto frowned doubtfully, but Dr. Hopper took his arm. "He's right. In counseling I'd never let someone's relatives eavesdrop on a session."
Mr. Gold waited until the two left, the bedroom door clicked shut, and their scuffling shoes could no longer be heard on the stairs. Then he bent low over Pinocchio to whisper in his ear, "I should destroy you, shouldn't I—after that trick you played on me. It was cruel stirring my hopes, taking advantage of my grief, making me think you were my son, wringing tears from me just to further your scheme to get your hands on my dagger and make me your slave. By rights, I should conjure a fire and incinerate you in your bed." To prove he could, he formed a small flame on the palm of his hand.

Mr. Gold studied his patient for a reaction. Despite his threats, the face remained impassive—wooden, in fact. Not a single twitch of emotion betrayed what he was thinking. No wonder Reul Gorm had included such a heavy dose of guilt in her animating spell that any lie would be as plain as the nose on Pinocchio's face. With a living marionette, how else would one tell?

Mr. Gold snuffed out the ball of fire and arranged his own features into an expression of benevolence. "But you feel bad about hoodwinking me, don't you?"

This time one blink caused Pinocchio's nose to grow shorter.

"You were desperate, weren't you?"

Blink, shrink.

"You thought controlling the Dark One was your only option."

Blink, shrink.

"Somebody else put you up to it."

The eyelids froze. For a moment, Mr. Gold feared Pinocchio had truly gone inert—right in the middle of his interrogation. Then the wooden man blinked twice. And the nose grew.

Mr. Gold pursed his lips in an exaggeration of parental disapproval. "Pinocchio August Wayne Booth Polendina, I told you that lying to me isn't healthy. Or are you more afraid of your accomplice than you are of me?"

Blink, shrink.

"Ahh," said Mr. Gold.

Emma stabbed at the ogre's thumb, aiming for the cuticle. She knew that if one didn't find just the right spot, ogre hide was thick enough to deflect steel. If his face ever came into range, they'd skewer him in his single, soft, vulnerable eye.

*Unless he gets us first.*

Mary-Margaret thrust her sword into a crack in the ogre’s palm. Roaring, the monster shook his hand, and the blade snapped. Without wasting a second, she grabbed a rock and threw it at the ogre’s chest.

*That's my Mom,* Emma thought. *A real warrior princess.* Unlike Aurora, screeching her lungs out below them.

*Can't Mulan shut her up?*

Something glimmered on the horizon. *Moonrise? It couldn't be dawn.*
But whatever the light was, it didn't scare the ogre. His fingers poked Mary-Margaret in the chest, shoving her against the rock. Emma gasped, gripped her mother's arm and pulled hard. In the faint glow, she could see desperation on Mary-Margaret's pale face. Giving up on trying to yank her mother free, Emma jabbed her blade under the ogre's nail.

The monster yelped.

"It's distracted," Mary-Margaret rasped. "Save yourself."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Live. For Henry's sake."

Abruptly, the ogre jerked its hand away, using it instead to bat the air. Emma saw her mother's eyes widen.

"That sparkle! Fairies!"

Emma swiveled on her haunches to look where Mary-Margaret was pointing. A dozen flickering beings were darting around the wildly swinging ogre—like highly intelligent gnats determined to drive it mad. The figures sparkled, whizzed, and lunged, making the ogre stretch farther and farther, trying to reach them.

> Fairies?

"Can't catch me, you stupid old ogre!" one of them sang out in a strangely childish voice. The ogre swatted in its direction but connected with air.

"Nya, nya, nya, nya, nya," chirruped another.

Enraged, the ogre let go of the ledge and thrust out both arms to snatch its tormentors.

> Can an ogre keep its balance on a cliff without hanging on? Emma wondered.

With a bellow that shook the stone ledge beneath their crouching bodies, the ogre proved the answer was No as it slid off the crag, whooshed past, and crashed with a Boom! in the abyss below.

Emma buried her face against Mary-Margaret and felt her Mom pressing hers into her shoulder as dirt and gravel deluged them.

When it was over, she heard, "Are these the ones, Tink?" followed by a bell-like jingle.

Raising her head and shaking debris out of her hair, Emma gawked at the small twinkling figure hovering just beyond the lip of their crevice.

> Not a fairy, she thought. That's a little boy.

The fear August felt from being left helpless with Mr. Gold was paralyzing—or would have been if he hadn't already relapsed into wood.

When his father Geppetto had sent him to Earth ahead of the curse, he'd charged him with looking after baby Emma. Selfishly, August had abandoned her to some pretty mean foster parents the first chance he'd had to run away. Ever since, life for the intrepid August W. Booth had been a series of adventures, escapes, and punishments—the latter dispensed by the loving hand of the Blue Fairy.
When the curse broke, her reproaches had sent him deep into the forest. Wandering among the trees, reviewing his failures, August had found that imagining his father's disappointment was as disheartening as witnessing it would have been. Soon regrets had sapped the life out of him. By the time he'd heard his godfather Jiminy whoop *Eureka! Pinocchio is here!* August could barely move.

Now his existence had been reduced to two choices: lie to Mr. Gold and have his nose betray him or tell the truth and face retaliation.

"Before you showed up in Storybrooke, you had a contact."

Mr. Gold's voice sounded hollow, but the words were clear. Afraid not to respond, August blinked once.

"This contact knew all about your other identity, my other identity, the curse that brought us here."

Blink.

"This contact was Mother Superior, better known to you as the Blue Fairy."

August froze—too terrified to lie to Mr. Gold, too respectful to betray the wondrous and perilous being who had granted him life and repeatedly demonstrated she could take it away.

After a long pause, his tormentor said, "Well, this is a dilemma. I've asked a question not so simple for an obedient marionette to answer. To make things easier, I'll give you another option: blink three times for *decline to say.*"

August felt a faint stirring in his wooden chest. Hurriedly, he gave three blinks. The blessing of a third choice seemed like a breath of air.

"As I'd thought," Mr. Gold murmured. Then, more loudly, "Honesty is the best policy. A few more truthful responses should shrink your nose to normal. Ready to try?"

August blinked.

"Ruby is the tastiest dish on the diner's menu."

The unexpected statement threw August for a moment. Then he blinked once.

"Dogs should be allowed to run free on public lands."

Strangely, Mr. Gold's voice sounded less muted. August could detect an undertone of amusement. He blinked twice.

"When you were little, nothing was more important than obeying Jiminy Cricket."

Blink, blink, blink.

"You've hated every moment you've lived in this world without magic and wish you'd never been sent here."

Once more, August didn't know how to respond. Images of growing up raced through his head—the exhilaration of shimmying down an orphanage drainpipe, the ignominy of being hauled back in a cop car, the joy of enthralling the other kids with his escapades, his loneliness when his friends were adopted and he was left behind, the satisfaction of his first hook-up, the gloom of yet another rejection letter, the pride of finally seeing his name in print.
And lemurs, August thought. Don't forget reaching Madagascar and discovering lemurs. You don't hate this world at all.

But before he could blink twice, he remembered his father and their twenty-nine-year separation. I hated being sent to this world.

"So. Life is too complex for only three choices. Shocking." Dimly, August could make out Mr. Gold's pale, grave face. "Open and close your jaw once if your answer is partially yes and partially no."

August tried it. The joy of moving his mouth to communicate—even without words—made him tingle all over.

Mr. Gold leaned closer. "The Blue Fairy is a real bitch, isn't she?"

The abrupt question unnerved August. How could he answer? If he allowed the scamp in him to blink once for yes, what if she found out? She was his mother—nearly. He was fearful of hurting her feelings. Yet he suspected a simple two blinks for no would make his nose grow, and three blinks for decline to say would be just as telling.

August was about to drop his jaw for partially yes and partially no when Mr. Gold said, "Let me rephrase." His voice was soothing. "From the moment you first opened your eyes, you've known your life depended on the Blue Fairy. To obey meant consciousness, to disobey meant being a block of wood. No matter how much your rebellious mind sought other possibilities, when duty called, the guilt she'd instilled in you pulled you back. She may have granted your father's wish to see you move without strings, but for all the freedom she allowed, you might as well have remained a marionette."

August sighed. The Blue Fairy had always been a bit domineering.

"I've seen Henry's book. It doesn't do you justice. When you saved your father from the storm, the Blue Fairy made you a real boy—as if you'd earned it. But you didn't give Geppetto the only life preserver because you were trying to prove yourself brave, truthful, and unselfish. You gave it to him out of love."

August blinked once. His eyes felt moist.

"Forget obedience. What made you real was your love for your father. Your love for him, for Jiminy, for yourself, for the whole great wide world—that's the only thing you need to keep you human."

August began to weep. He pressed his fingers against his eyelids to squeeze out the tears. The Blue Fairy had sorely misjudged Mr. Gold. He should have known from the man's sobs when he'd lied and called him Papa how compassionate Mr. Gold could be; instead, he'd let her intolerance cloud his insight. With her everything was yes or no, brave or cowardly, truth or lie, selfless or selfish, good or evil. She refused to see something could be both.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Mr. Gold studying him. August began to smile. Then, quick as a cobra, the older man grabbed his wrist and twisted his hand away from his tear-soaked face. Aghast, August watched the soft lips curve in the snaggle-toothed sneer he remembered so well from when Mr. Gold had jammed him against the tree with the Dark One's dagger.

"What happens in the next few minutes, dearie, depends on you. Provide the answers I require, and soon you'll be enjoying the hugs and laughter of your dear old dad. Cross me and you'll regret it. Your love may have made you human. My power can make you kindling."

Mr. Gold released him and folded his hands in his lap. "Now that we've set the rules, tell me who
drew you the sketch of the dagger that bears my name. In words, please. The blinking thing is getting tiresome."

Belle watched Leroy jump, grab the highest shelf, and hang. "See? They don't even wiggle."

"Great work as usual." Though I'm going to need a stepping stool to set any books on the top. When Belle had arranged with her handyman friend to assemble the bookcases, she'd meant to present them to Rumple. The metal units were utilitarian, but they were the same as the ones in the public spaces downstairs. If Rumple's not going to use these for his library, then I'll use them for mine.

Leroy let go and dropped to the floor. As he scooped his jacket off a nearby crate, he said, "Me and the guys are going to the community center—catch this week's movie. Want to come?"

"It's 'Groundhog Day' again. As good as the story was, I just saw it with all of you last Monday." And the so-you're-the-new-Snow-White jokes at intermission had been endless. "In fact, this would make it three weeks in a row."

"But last time Hopper led the discussion afterwards. Tonight, it's the Blue Fairy."

Belle sighed. No denying Groundhog Day reflected their experiences in Storybrooke more than Beauty and the Beast reflected her experiences in the Enchanted Forest. But to truly explore their new culture, couldn't they use a little variety? As much as Belle adored literary devices, seeing that particular movie three times in a row would be a bit too ironic. Besides, just like Rumple wanted to reclaim his books, she wanted to reclaim hers. With half the crates gone, she now had room to unpack, examine, sort, and shelve.

Surely, that's enough justification to say no. She shook her head.

"Are you sure? If anyone can help us deal with our situation, it's her."

Belle frowned. She knew, deep down, the biggest reason she didn't want to go: the Blue Fairy made her uneasy. And Rumple absolutely abhorred her. "Isn't she the one who came between you and Nova? I'm surprised you get along."

"With Blue?" Leroy looked down, twisted his foot, and paused as if inspecting his boot heel. "What can I say? She's the head fairy. She knows things. More than any of us. She's, you know, the original power."

Rumple had always referred to her by her ancient name, Reul Gorm. As far as Belle had been able to divine, she was the only one whose magic made him nervous.

"Everyone says the Blue Fairy is noble, pure and light. All I know about her is that she doesn't believe in true love." Not even family love. Though Rumple would never discuss it, Belle suspected Reul Gorm had something to do with his separation from his son.

Leroy jammed his hands in the pockets of his plaid-lined jacket. "Yes, well, Blue believes in... a higher calling. Who am I to question her?"

A higher calling than true love? That was another reason not to go: She didn’t want to get into an argument.

Belle gestured to her new shelves. "I have a lot to do here. Say 'hi' to the guys for me." Up till now, she'd given each crate a cursory peek—just enough to identify whose books it held. If she dug deeper, she might find some surprises.
Chapter End Notes

I wish the show had included more interaction between Mr. Gold and August after 1x19. I always thought Mr. Gold had set up the meeting between August and Geppetto in his shop that then sent him to his woodcarver dad’s workshop to ask about a job.
Who Told You About Me?

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold has questions.

So does August.

The Blue Fairy has answers.

Emma and Mary-Margaret try to figure out what's going on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**August (Pinocchio): Do I even look like him at all? (The Return)**

Smee took one last look at the rusted biscuit tin lying atop the moldering lilies, wilted chrysanthemums, and squashed sunflower heads. Being crushed in the garbage truck compactor tomorrow morning would serve it right.

He slapped the dumpster lid down and wheeled it to the curb. Whistling, he sauntered through the backdoor of Game of Thorns, locked it, and headed for the cash register. If he was lucky, he'd find some loose change on the floor. One time he'd even pocketed a customer's gold earring.

Rounding the rack of decorative doormats, Smee stopped cold. *It can't be.* The box was sitting atop the checkout counter. Apprehensively, he took three more steps and craned his neck. *Bloody hell.* The scratched-up wreath of Christmas bells adorning the lid identified it as the very same hard-to-find object the pipsqueak had dug up that morning.

As the hook unlatched and the lid creaked open, Smee froze. If anything, the light inside looked hotter and brighter than it had that afternoon.

“No! No! No!” Smee threw his hands up to shield his face. Then he shrieked as the punishing white light seared his knuckles.

“Don't be bashful,” Mr. Gold murmured.

August continued lying on his cot making *ahem* and *hmm* noises. Now that he was flesh again, he couldn't work up the energy to speak. His muscles ached from being stiff for so long. His mouth was dry from dehydration. The faint smell of Geppetto's cooking wafting up through the floorboards reminded him he hadn't eaten since the Storybrooke curse broke. That Mr. Gold had retrieved his cane and was idly drumming his fingers on the brass handle made him feel weaker still. He suspected a sharp rap would really hurt.

At least he'll no longer be able to tell if I'm lying. Not, so the Blue Fairy. She could tell. She could always tell.

“I know what the legends say,” Mr. Gold continued softly. “Speak the creature's name and she shall
appear, but magic works differently here. I don't know what powers she has regained, but I rather
doubt popping in and out of rooms is one of them.”

_You'd be surprised_. A dozen years before, the Blue Fairy had managed to ship herself to him in a
small wooden box, so he could take her to see Emma's baby daddy. How she'd convinced the poor
man to ditch the love of his life remained a mystery, but she always accomplished what she said she
would. If she wasn't flitting around August's bedroom, she was still flitting about inside his head.

Mr. Gold loomed forward, training his hypnotic brown eyes on August's. “Whisper it if you must,
dearie, but I will have your answer.”

August let the vulnerability and anxiety he felt show on his face. It would make repeating the story
the Blue Fairy had concocted for him the previous spring all the more convincing. “You're right. She
gave me the drawing. Baelfire drew it in exchange for a magic bean.”

As soon as he'd spoken, August regretted it. At the sound of his son's name, all the muscles in Mr.
Gold's face went rigid. Deep lines creased his brow. He compressed his lips as if to keep them from
trembling. Then he jerked his head in swift denial. “She lied.”

August allowed himself a tip of his chin—a tacit _you may be right_—but he could see the doubt his
words had planted.

“It's clear you don't really know, and you have nothing more to tell me.” Mr. Gold pressed his
fingers against his forehead and shook his head vigorously. “Good. Let me finish what I promised
Dr. Hopper.”

Standing his cane against the nightstand, he reached into the inner pocket of his black pinstripe suit
and pulled out a vial of orange liquid. “Your marionette status is demoralizing—not knowing if this
is the day some chance cowardly, dishonest, selfish deed will revert you to wood forever. With this
that ends.” He tapped the side of the bottle. As the potion began to glow, he passed his other hand
over the bed. Gradually, silver strings appeared, tied to August's jaw, elbows, and wrists and leading
up to Mr. Gold's fingers.

“What the hell?” August breathed.

Mr. Gold smiled. “You didn't know these were there, did you—waiting for the next puppeteer with
an inclination to make you jump.”

When Mr. Gold waggled his fingers, August could feel his head jerk back-and-forth while his arms
lifted off the bed covers in a mockery of a shrug. Then his chin dropped, and his mouth opened
wide. Mr. Gold blew on the bottle and the wax stopper fizzed away. He poured the bubbling potion
down August's throat until he spluttered and gagged.

“Drink up. That's a good little marionette. This is the last action you'll ever take because someone
else is pulling the strings.”

August felt his temperature rise in the worst fever he'd had in his life. His skin was so hot the silver
threads frazzled like hair too close to a candle. In a moment they were gone, leaving nothing but a
nasty stink in the air. The heat remained. He gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. _I'm turning into
kindling!_

Mr. Gold's uncommonly large eyes smoldered with the same uncanny fire sizzling through August's
body. “Oh, yeah. It burns. Reul Gorm wove her threads deep.”

August moaned. How could it end this way? The Blue Fairy had told him if he came to her before he
did anything, things would work out. He had. They hadn't.

Then the impossible happened. Just as quickly as they had started, the flames were gone. Extinguished. Doused. Snuffed. A delicious coolness flooded his body. He pressed his string-free hands against his stubbly cheeks. Temperature: Normal.

August took a deep breath, luxuriating in his newfound, absolute, unadulterated humanity. “I need a trim.”

Mr. Gold gave him a sardonic smile. Picking up his cane, he thumped it once on the floor.

Emma stared, bemused, at the hovering boy. Black-haired, brown-eyed, green-clad, he appeared to be a little younger than Henry. No wings or apparatus explained his ability to stay aloft—only the cloud of sparkles shimmering around him. Fairy dust and happy thoughts! I know this story. Beyond him, a posse of smaller boys twinkled and soared. A tiny green light flickered and jingled beside the boy's ear. Tinker Bell?

“I've never seen anything like them in the Enchanted Forest,” Mary-Margaret whispered.

Emma smiled. “That's because they're not from around here. They're Lost Boys.”

“Of course. Neverland. I read Peter Pan and Wendy to my fourth-grade class. They're the nemesis of Captain Hook.”

“You know Hook?!” The hovering boy scowled.

“Well, yes. Sort of, but—” Emma began.

The green light flared.

“They're Hook's wenches!” the boy shouted. “Secure their weapons.”

Two of the smaller boys sped toward them.

“Oh, really?” Emma muttered. Before she had time to turn her short sword safely handle out, the curly-headed one grabbed it.

“Ouch!” he shrieked, and a wisp of sparkles swirled away from his hand as her blade fell into the chasm.

“Mine broke,” Mary-Margaret said to the cherub-faced boy, “but tell your friends to take the scabbard from Mulan, too. Children shouldn't fly with unsheathed blades.”

At her mother's warning, the cherub folded his arms and pouted—a boy who wasn't going to do something a grownup said ever. Ignoring him, young master curly whipped a rope of vines off his belt and strung it around the both of them.

“Wait a minute!” Emma said, pulling off the clumsy loops as fast as he added them. “Wait!” She could hear Mulan and Aurora making a similar commotion with their would-be captors on the ledge below.

The hovering boy planted his hands on his hips. “No need to tie 'em, men. Grab 'em by the scruffs of their necks. Once we're flying, they won't struggle.”

Flying? “No! Stop! ... Peter,” Emma hazarded, “we're on your side.”
“Naw. You're with Hook. Tink saw you. And I'm not Peter.”

The curly-top grabbed Emma's hand and the cherub grabbed Mary-Margaret's. The two began tugging. Emma braced her boot heels against the crevice's lip. Without warning, the boys dropped their hands, clambered onto their laps, and jabbed their fingers into their sides. In an instant, Emma was mad as hell and giggling hysterically.

“Stop tickling! You can't… expect us to… fly…” Her mother sounded frantic amidst her gasping laughter. “Let us explain… to your leader… Go… get… Peter….”

Suddenly, the hovering boy looked utterly lost. “We can't. We can't see him—not ever, ever again.” He started to snivel. “Peter left to grow up.”

August raised his forehead from where he'd nuzzled it on his father's shoulder. Snug inside his embrace, Geppetto still quivered—half laughing, half crying. Behind him, Jiminy shuffled from foot to foot, squeezing his arm and mumbling, “We were worried. We were so worried.” The welcome home affection of two of his three most important people in the world filled him with happiness like he'd never known. And yet his attention kept straying beyond the circle of lamplight to the man waiting in the darkness on the far side of the attic: Mr. Gold—wizard, healer, reckoner. What does he want from me?

Finally, August's anxiety got the better of him. “You haven't told us your price.” He smiled, trying to soften his suspicion with a hint of friendliness. Inside, he was worried. What if Mr. Gold wasn't satisfied with the information he'd squeezed out of him? What if he asked for a favor?

His father twisted around. “Anything you want! Anything at all! You've brought my boy back!”

“He's a real man?” Jiminy asked, sounding as if he didn't dare believe it. “No more—no more relapses? He's cured?”

“No payment is too great for that!” Geppetto said happily.

August couldn't make out Mr. Gold's face in the shadows, but he caught his little shrug. “I have a music box that's skipping some notes.”

“When I'm done, that box will sing like the angels.”

“I value your skills.” Mr. Gold cocked his head. “And I missed supper. If you wrap me a slice of that pork I smell roasting, our account is settled.”

“Wrap a slice? I'm cooking it for you! That's not an account. That's an invitation.”

Mr. Gold hesitated. “An… invitation?”

“Let me check the polenta.” Geppetto hurried to the door.

With his usual lopsided gait, Mr. Gold entered the light. “Hope it doesn't burn while you're waiting for me to climb down the stairs.”

“I can lend you a hand…” Jiminy's voice trailed off awkwardly.

“No. You go ahead. August will keep me from tumbling.”

Mr. Gold's winning smile didn't calm August. Swallowing hard, he watched his godfather head for the door. When he saw Mr. Gold keep pace despite his limp he thought, Maybe he won't need me
after all. But on the landing the older man paused, gesturing for assistance. Reluctantly, August joined him, took the cane from his hand, and stooped to offer his shoulder. Neither spoke as they began their descent, August lifting, swinging, and lowering his menacing benefactor step-by-step.

When he was sure Jiminy was out of earshot down the winding staircase, he just had to check—one more time. “Repairing a music box? That's it?”

“The music box is a bonus. My real payment is spoiling Reul Gorm's plans.”

August coughed. “She doesn't have any plans for me.” Not at the moment.

“You’re back tenses when you lie.” Mr. Gold chuckled. “Don't be alarmed. I know your relationship is complex. The next time she calls on you, you'll want to come. You'll feel obligated to come. But if you're on the other side of the globe, engrossed in some exciting intrigue, you won't come. Without strings to pull, she's nothing. Unless she's animated some other marionette I don't know about, she'll have to find another way to work her manipulations.”

In silence, August helped Mr. Gold down several more stairs. He had to admit, the man had him pegged, but his loathing of the Blue Fairy was a bit disturbing. Sure, she could be strict. But who doesn't like fairies?

“And if I'm wrong,” Mr. Gold added, “and you ever dare spy on me for her again, your humanity gives me an advantage. Wood can't feel pain.”

In the community center, David joined the applause at the end of Groundhog Day. Under his breath, he sang along with Nat King Cole “…smile on my face… la-la human race… la-la like being in…”

Mid-lyric, the screen went dark.

Around him, audience members grumbled. Did the film break? Then the lights flicked on.

Beside him, Henry squirmed in his seat then pointed to Mother Superior, standing center stage. An ageless beauty despite her prim pulled-back hair, drab navy cape, and long gray skirt, her smile commanded unquestionable authority. As people noticed her, the whispers died away.

Too bad magic coming to Storybrooke didn’t bring back her lacy fairy wings, David thought.

Once the Blue Fairy held the room’s attention, she dove right in. “Of the many lessons in Groundhog Day, these five are particularly important to our little community. First, our actions have consequences. When we deny that, we doom ourselves to reliving the same traumas over and over.”

Isn’t that the truth. Glancing around, David saw his fellow citizens nodding. And some people’s actions have more consequences than others.

“Second, no matter our circumstances, we should fulfill the role fate assigned us in the noblest way possible.”

The left side of David’s mouth twisted in a smile. He was pretty sure Rumplestiltskin had picked to play rebel prince, and Regina was definitely responsible for his role of rebel prince in a coma.

“Third, the secret to contentment is learning from our mistakes and accepting the consequences.”

David released a breathy snort. Try telling Rumplestiltskin and Regina.

“Fourth, true fulfillment is service to others.”
No argument there. The protect-and-serve duties of acting sheriff were kind of fun.

“And fifth…” Pausing, Blue cast her gaze up and down the rows of seats, favoring everyone with her special smile. “If we dedicate ourselves to what is noble, pure, and light, every day can be our best day.”

David sighed. Not without Snow beside him.

Blue folded her arms inside her cape. “Does anyone have any questions?”

The week before, Jiminy’s recounting of the movie’s funniest bits and enthusiastic invitation to sing along with *It’s Almost Like Being in Love* had inspired lively discussion. Blue’s life lessons made everyone silent and thoughtful.

“Well, then,” she said, “it’s time for refreshments.”

Before David could open his mouth, Henry scooted past him and raced to the urns of hot apple cider and platters of cookies being laid out by the St. Meissa Sisters of Eternal Purity. At a more grownup pace, David joined a line.

When he reached the refreshment table, he smiled at Sister Astrid.

“Hello, Sheriff.” Glancing from one side to the other, she leaned forward. “Have you found Sister Blanca?” She lowered her voice. “You know, Silvermist?”

David frowned. “She’s missing?”

The Blue Fairy glided up behind Astrid. The novice jerked her hand and sent a half-full cup of cider flying.

“Let’s not bother the sheriff with the trifle of one wayward nun reconnecting with her faith.”

“Yes, Mother Superior.” Busily, Astrid sopped up the spilled cider.

The Blue Fairy locked her iridescent eyes on David’s. “Silvermist left before dawn to spend time in the woodlands she loves. When her spirit is refreshed, I’m certain she will return to her duties.”

Staring back, David nodded.

When Mother Superior drifted away, David released his breath. Astrid stopped mopping. He followed her gaze to Grumpy, ducking down in the middle of his six brothers.

David picked up a cup of steaming cider. He had to agree with Mother Superior. Silvermist skipping out to think things through wasn’t strange at all. Frankly, he was surprised more fairy-nuns hadn’t left for a taste of life beyond the convent walls.

---

As the hovering boy wept, he lost buoyancy. He let out a sob and dropped half a foot. Blinking and tinkling, the green light zigzagged frantically around his head.

*Oh, no,* Emma thought between gasping giggles. *Without happy thoughts that's a long way down.*

“Enough!” She grabbed the curly-haired boy's wrists, wrestled his tickling fingers away from her rib cage, and held him, wriggling, at arm's length. “What makes you Neverland kids happy? Puppies? Ice cream? Christmas?”
The boy glowered.

She spun him around. “Quick! He's falling.”

When he saw, he tore from her grasp and—grabbing the cherub's hand—sped to his friend. The others swiftly rallied, circling Peter Pan's bawling successor, yanking him up by his leafy green tunic, and shouting a jumble of flight worthy notions in his face.

“Happy thoughts!” Mary-Margaret encouraged them.

Out of the cacophony of cheery ideas, the boy picked one. First, he mumbled it. Then he declared it. Instantly, he bobbed back up in the air. The others fell into chorus with him until it became a battle cry: “Kill Hook! Kill Hook! Kill Hook!”

The fairy dust eddied around them like a glitter whirligig. No longer just hovering, the Lost Boys put on a twinkling aerial display of corkscrews, cartwheels, and back flips.

“Kill Hook?” Mary-Margaret breathed. “I hope they figure out we’re not Hook's wenches.”

Chapter End Notes

This is mainly (enthusiastically) a Rumbelle, Swanfire story, but it has a little bit of DreamyNova, too.
We'll Have That Little Talk

Chapter Summary

Geppetto's dinner party.

The other half of ship Swanfire sails into port.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jefferson the Mad Hatter: Two lives in our heads, cursed worse than ever. (We Are Both)

Mr. Gold slid his knife through the fennel seed, rosemary, and crushed garlic crust into the tender porchetta. This invitation was his first decent meal in weeks. Though he enjoyed cooking, since Belle had left, he hadn't had the heart to turn on his stove. As he savored another bite, he saw his host smile. *I'm expected to make dinner conversation*, he reminded himself.

"This is excellent. Where did you learn the recipe?"

"From Mamma, back in Cortona. That's the village in Tuscany where I was born." The smile faded from Geppetto's face. "Except that I wasn't born there, was I? Even though that childhood seems so real to me—Mamma baking brutti ma buoni in the kitchen, Papa carving angels for the tourists."

Not to mention that picturing imaginary parents in Italy is happier than remembering cursed parents in the Enchanted Forest. Mr. Gold swallowed then attempted a smile. "I could swear I studied at the University of Glasgow School of Law. I remember chilly lecture halls, towers of books, endless pots of coffee." And nearly being expelled for cheating on the Conveyancing exam until I found dirt on the professor and struck a non-interference deal. Even my sham past is disreputable.

Pinocchio continued scooping pork, polenta, and peas into his mouth but his glances at his dinner companions were keenly interested. Wiping his chin with his red checkered napkin, he said, "Before I wrote *Jakarta Never Forgives*, I created bios for all my characters. I amassed a lot of detail to make them true to life, but that doesn't mean any of it actually happened."

Dr. Hopper laid down his fork. "At first, I thought our cursed personas were—were purely imaginary. But last week I—I had a visit from Sir Frederick and Princess Abigail. You'll remember... her Storybrooke self, Kathryn Nolan, was married to Charming's. Without going into their—their personal issues, I can say that as Kathryn Nolan, she was—was accepted to Boston College Law School. But how could she be? Not unless her Vassar transcripts and LSAT scores really—really exist."

"I don't think anybody knows everything about how the curse came off," Mr. Gold replied. "I don't think anybody has worked out all the details logically." He glanced from Marco-Geppetto to Hopper-Jiminy. Did either of them know the part he'd played?

Dr. Hopper's eyebrows knitted together. Then he cleared his throat. "I—I've been wondering whether we've all, maybe, replaced people in this world."

*There he goes again—Storybrooke's most decent man seeking reasons to feel guilty.* "That can't be it."
For the most part, everyone looks as they did in the Enchanted Forest. So we're not inhabiting other people's bodies—nor their lives. Pinocchio's—or should I say August's—theory is better. Like a writer, the curse constructed fake biographies. To make them believable, it added documentation as well as memories."

And like his memories, Mr. Gold's documentation oozed misery—a Daily Express clipping of his alleged fiancée's leap off Erskine Bridge. And all the while, his real sweetheart had been held under false pretenses in Storybrooke Hospital's lockup ward. My darling Belle. He'd assumed Regina had decreed his history be wretched just to amuse herself, but now he wondered whether Reul Gorm had pulled some strings. If she hadn't been under the curse, had she been on top of it?

Dr. Hopper removed his glasses. "I can still picture my—my roommate at SUNY. Vincent Chalmers. Our road trip to New Orleans was—was outstanding. I've looked him up on the Net. He teaches at Rutgers. If I contacted him, do you think he—he'd have memories of me, too?"

Mr. Gold noted the wistfulness in Dr. Hopper's blue eyes. "I'd wager he even has photos." At his words, the doctor's expression brightened. So, I'm not the only one with more of a stake in this world than the old. How soon before he'd find the magic to cross the Storybrooke border without losing his memory? How soon before he could finally reunite with his son and beg his forgiveness for letting him go?

"But what about your ages?" Pinocchio tore off a hunk of French bread. "Isn't Chalmers twenty-eight years older than you are now?"

The psychologist returned his glasses to his nose. "That's—that's the strange part. He's not. In my memory, we earned our Clin Psy doctorates twenty years ago—even though I know I—I was already a counselor in Storybrooke. If the curse had ended earlier, would I share memories, fond memories with a—a different roommate?"

I'd share fond memories with no one. Just like now. Mr. Gold took a sip of pinot.

"Amazing," Pinocchio said, brushing baguette crumbs from his beard. "For twenty-eight years, all around this world, memories were forming and fading, documentation was appearing and disappearing, just to maintain the curse? That's incredibly complex."

Mr. Gold set down his wine glass. Yes, it was. So complex that perhaps it had required one more author than he'd realized.

Sailing through the night, high above the Enchanted Forest, held aloft by four kids, Emma thought touchdown couldn't come fast enough. Despite her fear of flying—at least via Lost Boys—she couldn't complain aloud. After all, telling chubby under her right arm to cover his mouth when he sneezed or pointing out to freckle-face under her left arm that his squirming made her airsick weren't happy thoughts.

In the pale moonlight, she could see that even Aurora was doing her best to smile.

So when are we getting to Neverland?

Below her, the forest gave way to what looked like a swamp. The croaking of frogs and the fetid odor rising with the curling mist confirmed it. Here and there flames spouted from the muck, accompanied by a popping sound.

After they'd traversed a few miles of desolation, the boys stopped doing whatever it was that made them fly forward and began dropping. Fast.
As mud and stone rushed toward her, Emma screamed a long, agonized, "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh!" The thought of lying mangled on the ground wasn't happy, but she couldn't help herself.

A few inches from death, the boys came to a complete stop. Emma swung crazily between them, making the compass bump around inside her bra. Then the two holding her ankles gently lowered her feet until she was standing on a mossy boulder overlooking a makeshift camp. The lean-tos were hidden in bracken and strewn with leaves. A mat of vines covered what looked like a charcoal-smudged circle of rocks.

When Aurora landed, she sank to all fours and vomited. Mulan strode off—scouting. As soon as her mother was standing, Emma hugged her. "It looks like we're not prisoners after all."

She heard a Pop! and a fire blazed up a few feet away. In its light Emma saw an I'm not so sure about that look on Mary-Margaret's face. "The Lost Boys don't need to tie us up. We're in the middle of the Fire Swamp. The lightning sand, fire spouts, and ROUS will keep us from running."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "ROUS?"

"Rodents of Unusual Size."

"If that's what I smell cooking," Emma said, "I'm going to eat it anyway. I'm starving."

Archie accepted a couple of iced anisette cookies from Geppetto and swiveled on the couch to pass the platter. He paused when he saw Mr. Gold surreptitiously rubbing the back of his bad leg through his black pinstripe pants. His grimace said the pain was sharp.

"Would a hot pack help? Or maybe ice?" Archie asked.

Mr. Gold straightened up and put on a smile. "Don't trouble yourself. It's an old injury."

"How old?" Geppetto asked. His expression was sympathetic.

For an instant, Mr. Gold's brown eyes widened, startled like a deer's. Evidently, nobody asked him questions like this. At first, he shrugged, but his gaze remained locked with Geppetto's. Then he took a deep breath. "When I was small, the master tasked me with gathering the sheep for shearing. Lightning struck. I was trampled."

*He was employed by a master shearer as a child?* In Archie's day, only family businesses got away with working youngsters like they were adults. Growing up in his parents' traveling show, he'd envied the boys and girls whose sole responsibilities were school and play. If Mr. Gold—Rumplestiltskin—trained in a wool works as a child, then the legend he was older than he looked was true. "At what age were you apprenticed?"


Archie raised his eyebrows. Mr. Gold was much older than he looked. The custom of impoverished peasants indenturing their offspring to repay debts placed his childhood two hundred some years before his own. Archie knew that just like he'd never actually met Vincent Chalmers, he'd never actually written a dissertation, but the memory was just as clear: *Triumphs, Tragedies, and Moving On: The Challenges of Life's Stages.* Mr. Gold must have been through dozens.

As though reading his speculations, the object of them narrowed his eyes waringly. Hastily, Archie cast about for a change of topic, and his eyes lit on Mr. Gold's ever-present cane, nestled in the crook of his arm. "You didn't use to require a walking stick—" he began, then mentally kicked himself for
choosing a topic even worse.

"When I was the Dark One?" Mr. Gold gave him a sly smile. Leaning forward, he picked one pizzelle wafer from the platter still balanced on Archie's knees. "That curse was hard on teeth, but it did wonders for bone and sinew. The instant it took hold, I could run and leap as I hadn't since I was five."

Pinocchio shook his head. "But you're a wizard again. You fixed me. Why don't you fix your own leg?"

"Can't." Mr. Gold took a bite of pizzelle. "Magic works differently here. I can heal any ailment I set my mind to except anything that ails me."

Archie tilted his head. "Your library. Now that you have it again, you might—you might find the answer there." Unless the answer lies with unresolved issues in your subconscious.

"Perhaps. But first my focus must be finding how to bring back Emma and Mary-Margaret." His dessert finished, he began idly rolling his cane between his hands.

Pinocchio looked confused. "Bring back? From where?"

"Don't you know..." Archie's voice trailed off. Of course, he doesn't. Reluctant to deliver bad news, he took a moment to settle the platter on the rustic coffee table. Then he folded his hands. "The day the curse broke, the day you ran off into the woods, some—some sort of monster ripped through town. Then it vanished—down a magic portal. Emma and Snow were sucked along with it to—to whatever part of the Enchanted Forest wasn't brought here."

Archie heard Pinocchio's sharp intake of breath. "A portal? With a monster?"

"Not as dangerous as it sounds," Mr. Gold said quickly. "Wraiths only pursue their targets, and this wraith was not aimed at either of them. In flight, it would have created a wind that might have knocked them around a bit. Otherwise, it would have left them unharmed."

Observing Mr. Gold, Archie saw his eyelids flicker. Prince Charming said Mr. Gold was responsible for the wraith—acting out some inner conflict, no doubt. Now he's trying to make amends.

"But they're not here." Troubled, Pinocchio rubbed his beard. "Lately, have any strangers come to town?"

"To stay?" Geppetto asked. "You and Emma have been the only visitors ever who didn't just pass through. I still can't believe I hired you and didn't recognize my own son."

Pinocchio smiled at his father before sinking his forehead on his palms. Emma is like his little sister, Archie thought. No wonder he's upset. "Don't worry. Mr. Gold is—is spending this next week scouring his magic library, looking for information on—on portals."

"Let's hope I discover something that works with the magic in Storybrooke."

"What's different about the magic in Storybrooke?" Pinocchio asked.

"The Blue Fairy told me—" Archie began.

"Hah. What would she know?" The contempt in Mr. Gold's voice was blatant. This time it was
Pinocchio who sent Archie a warning glance. Mr. Gold released his breath slowly, seeming to collect himself. "After all, it's no secret that I released the magic. I poured a vial of true love potion down Storybrooke's wishing well. Strictly speaking, I didn't create what gave the potion its power. Prince Charming, Snow White, and Emma did with acts of love, sacrifice, and bravery. But I let the magic loose."

Archie straightened his glasses to keep his inspection of Mr. Gold from being too obvious. That he'd wanted magic in Storybrooke was no surprise—considering how long he'd depended on it. His decision of how to bring it was. As life stages went, his choice signified a major transition—to explore the unknowns of magic based on love, sacrifice, and bravery rather than fall back on the familiarity of Dark One magic. *Bravo!* Archie thought.

The Blue Fairy had told him that only her kind and their special dust—lots and lots of it—could bring the missing back to Storybrooke. But was that really true? She'd also insisted that Pinocchio's treatment had to wait for the dwarf miners to dig up fairy diamonds. Yet here he sat—a real, living, breathing, thinking, caring man again. If there was one form of magic Reul Gorm was incapable of understanding, it was true love.

Archie pondered the mysterious being who single-handedly had accomplished his godson's recovery. Mr. Gold aka Rumplestiltskin had certainly led a long and complicated life. Analysis of it might give him useful insights for mastering his newest phase.

Abruptly, Pinocchio stood up—making his chair wobble. "I'm still feeling a bit ragged. If nobody minds, I'm going to go lie down." As he headed for the stairs, he added, "Has anyone seen my backpack?"

Neal Cassidy surveyed the couples shimmying across the hotel ballroom. Flo Rida's *Wild Ones* had cleared out most of the over 40's. He'd pull them back with the selection lined up on his second turntable, Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'*. The happy bride shot him a grin, and he forced himself to return his professional DJ smile. This was his first wedding gig since he'd stopped believing. Right now, he felt like he'd never manage an honest smile again.

*Would've, could've, should've*, he said to himself. The irony was that if he could go back to fix the mistake that had caused his first catastrophic loss, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to make the mistake that had caused his second. Now the two people he'd loved most in his long, ridiculous life were a mere 500 miles further north. Since neither wanted to see him, they might as well have been in another universe.

Neal felt a slight vibration and reached into the hip pocket of his white tuxedo pants. Seeing the name on the screen, *NOLIEZ77*, was like an electric jolt. With no responses in nearly six weeks, he hadn't been sure he'd ever hear from August again. He tapped the message.

*OFF GRID. BACK NOW. U NOT HERE. Y?*

*Damn texting.* August's terse message raised too many questions for simple clicking. Neal knew from the old movies he liked to watch to educate himself about his chosen world that people used to chat by phone. His current situation called for either an hour of bro-to-bro talk or nothing.

*BZY*, he replied.

Neal was so intent on seeing what answer he'd receive, that he was late queuing his next song and started it after an amateurish half second of silence. By the time he looked back at his phone, he read, *U TXT EMMA?*
Seeing her name, Neal felt his face crumple. He turned away so the few hundred people celebrating true love wouldn't see him gritting his teeth and blinking his eyes. *Emma!* After a deep breath, he answered, *NO REPLY MOVIN ON.*

*NOLIEZ77's reply was mercifully quick: EMMA OFF GRID 2. LNG STRY. CN I CALL?*

Neal could feel his stomach do a somersault. He didn't even bother to snag the wedding coordinator to explain he was taking his break early. Instead, he headed straight across the dance floor for the service entrance, texting as he walked, 2 *NOISY ALLEY BTTR 1 SEC.*

Chapter End Notes

With this chapter, the story diverges from OUaT canon with an occasional touch point with a scene here and there from season 2. Most importantly, this story uses the original version of the kids from Peter Pan rather than the Lord of the Flies version used on the show.

When I initially wrote this chapter, "Manhattan" hadn't aired. The canonical explanation of Mr. Gold's limp is genius. I retained the reason he gives in this chapter (he certainly wouldn't have confessed to shirking battle during this casual after dinner talk) but come back to it several chapters later when he confesses to Belle.
Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold): Before you go, answer me this: How did it feel? *(We Are Both)*.

When Archie came down the stairs after checking on Pinocchio, Mr. Gold was already taking his leave. Earlier, he’d declined the offer of a ride with, *Don't trouble yourself. I'll call my car service.* Now, dressed in his black Burberry raincoat, gray cashmere scarf, and black kidskin gloves, he looked out-of-place in the woodcarver-slash-handyman's pine-paneled entryway.

As Archie approached, Mr. Gold took Geppetto's hand and shook it. "Thank you for inviting me. Nobody ever does."

"I know what you mean! Since the curse broke, everybody's been too distracted!"

Mr. Gold fidgeted with the brass handle of his cane. "I didn't mean since the curse broke. I meant ever."

"Oh, come now," Archie said, joining them. "You're exaggerating. Last spring, I saw you at Mary-Margaret's welcome home party."

Mr. Gold shrugged. "Someone else was going I wanted to observe. I invited myself."

"But… you were her lawyer. You had to—to invite yourself?" Archie frowned. "That's—that's not right."

Geppetto tsked in agreement.

Mr. Gold tipped his head to one side and then the other as if to assure them the matter was trivial. "People find my presence disturbing. Perhaps a carryover from the Enchanted Forest. You know. The whole *invite the imp and he'll eat your firstborn* thing."
Geppetto's forehead crinkled indignantly. "No. Don't say that. Surely, your friends—"

"Friends?" Mr. Gold bent his head, and his smooth brown hair fell across his face. "At best, I've known a handful of people I could trust to deal with me fairly." He shot Archie and Geppetto a quick smile. "That was something."

Archie shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The usual words of support he'd have offered a counseling client seemed inadequate. And a hug is out of the question.

But where Archie was cautious, Geppetto was artless. The kindest man I've ever known. He watched his friend give Mr. Gold's shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "We've always been fair with each other. That's because we're both craftsmen. We have the patience. We have the mindfulness. I think, maybe, we're already friends for a long, long time."

Archie saw Mr. Gold relax. Geppetto had that effect on people. "I'll remember this evening. You—"

Outside, a horn honked. The car service, Archie thought. Mr. Gold stepped back from his host—establishing space again.

"You take care of your boy."

As Mr. Gold turned to open the door, Archie snatched his coat and umbrella off the rack. "Wait a minute, I want to ask—" With a hasty farewell to Geppetto, he hurried and caught up with the man limping down the front path. "I think maybe—maybe I can help."

"Help?" In the porch light, Archie could see Mr. Gold's amused, skeptical glance.

Archie swallowed. "With the magic."

"Ho! The magic. Really, doctor, don't trouble yourself. I've got that covered." He continued walking.

Archie clasped his hands together, anxious not to flub this opportunity. "Back there. When Geppetto said he was your friend, why—why did you change the subject?" His words were stumbling, but they made Mr. Gold stop and lean on his cane. His driver honked again, and Archie gestured frantically One minute!

In measured tones, Mr. Gold replied, "I didn't change the subject. I meant what I said. I'll remember this evening—as the occasion a resident of Storybrooke called me his friend."

"But Geppetto meant what he said—"

"Tonight, yes. But tomorrow? When Reul Gorm hears about Pinocchio, she'll scold Geppetto for letting me burn away his strings. She'll say I opened up his son to corruption. At first Geppetto will disagree. Then she'll tell him about the others I've corrupted, and he'll wish he'd never allowed me in his door."

"That's, that's—" Archie blew out his breath. "Geppetto's a wise man. He'll evaluate what she says for—for himself."

Mr. Gold faced him. "Let me save him the time. Whatever ghastly deed she says I've done, Geppetto should assume she's right."

Archie closed his eyes a moment. This isn't going well. "You and the Blue Fairy—you're—you're at odds."
"At odds?" Mr. Gold laughed. "I'd say there're no words strong enough to express how much we despise each other."

The disdain in his voice shocked Archie. "But—but why?" Who doesn't like fairies?

"Remember when I came to your office to talk about my son? Well, Reul Gorm is the one who came between us. Let's leave it at that."

"Why—why doesn't she like you?"

Mr. Gold released his breath slowly. "Because I'm evil."

Archie froze, thoroughly stumped. Mr. Gold swung out his good leg and resumed hobbling down the path. Not until he was unlatching the picket gate did Archie shake his head, then rush to catch up. "You say things like that for—for effect, don't you?"

Mr. Gold chuckled. "Ah, doctor. You get me."

"But you—you also say them because you believe they're true."

"So insightful!" Mr. Gold waved to the Cadillac. "And to think your entire psychology education and clinical training were deposited into your brain by a curse."

Archie hung his head. He'd failed. But he wasn't the sort to go away without finishing a thought. "This magic you brought—love-based—it's new to you. Some spells come easily. Others are—are blocked. That's what I can help you with."

Mr. Gold sighed. "As I said before, doctor, don't trouble yourself."

Belle perched on a crate, sipping tea, gazing at her bookcases, assessing what she'd accomplished. The public library downstairs used the Dewey Decimal System to classify its books. After she'd figured it out, she'd found it quite useful. Her library, though, she was arranging according to her memory of the Dark Castle.

Standing on a chair, she'd placed the volumes on flora top left, followed by the volumes on fauna. The histories came in the middle, while the adventures, romances, and poetry grouped by author were spread across the bottom. The shelves Leroy had assembled were nine feet long and six shelves high. Gaps were left for subject matter she hadn't yet unpacked, but with only a quarter of her crates sorted, she could see four units weren't going to be enough. And if she added sections for her new interests—earth travel, psychology, and so on—she'd need even more space.

But no books on Stockholm syndrome. That subject didn't relate to her at all.

That afternoon, Henry's first computer lesson had been fun. And finding the answer to Prince Ivan's question—that his story was Russia's The Firebird—had taught Belle how to do her own search. Good thing she'd delayed it to after hours. That way no one had heard her release a string of words she'd first heard from a teamster whose mules were kicking his wagon apart.

Stockholm syndrome, she'd read. A phenomenon of abnormal psychology where hostages voice positive feelings toward their captors to the point of defending them or even claiming love. The victim irrationally interprets respite from abuse as overt kindness.

Really? How could her friends think her so weak-willed? Nobody decides my fate but me—that's what she'd told her father the day she'd agreed to Rumple's deal. At times his behavior had justified
the title *the Dark One* to the point where she'd worried whether her deal had been a grave mistake. But as far as she was concerned, her relationship with him had always been her own free choice.

*If anything puts the lie to this Stockholm syndrome nonsense, the trouble Rumple went to creating my library is it.*

For part of his gift, he'd relied on magic—conjuring an entire new tower to match the one that housed his study. But his gift had required hours of thought and personal attention as well. The foundation of the collection was a replication of the couple dozen books she'd managed to hide from her father who'd thought her love of reading was making her an old maid. Then Rumple had used the interests those books expressed to make deals for another couple thousand from the far-flung realms of the Enchanted Forest. After all that work, he'd presented her library with the comment, *I better not see a single speck of dust gathering on any of these books.*

Smiling, Belle swirled the tea leaves at the bottom of her cup. In every possible way, that day had been a turning point—the first time she and Rumple had argued about equity versus mercy, the first time she'd realized that her opinion bore weight, the first time she'd seen him forgive someone who'd wronged him. *The first time I gave Rumple a hug.*

Belle set her cup on the floor. *I'll unpack just one more and call it a night.* Standing, she picked a crate and raised the lid. *My astronomy books.* One of her favorite topics. As she lifted out a heavy volume, she smiled to see her leather telescope case beneath it. Then her breath caught. That patch of yellow—was it just a length of cloth protecting another delicate object? Or could it be—? Quickly, she pulled out the books piled on top of it.

*My yellow dress!* The billowing satin gown filled the bottom half of the crate. Carefully, Belle freed it then swung it out at arm's length. *As beautiful as the last time I wore it.* Seeing it again made her feel like singing.

Crouching by his bed, Neal gave his canvas duffel bag a tug, dislodged it from under the sagging mattress, and swung it atop the crumpled sheets. He dumped out classic rock T's, cargo shorts, sandals, and various summer accessories. Grabbing clean shirts from his clothes rack and scooping dirty ones off his moth-eaten easy chair, he began packing for November in Maine. He stuffed in the snarl of dirty jeans from his floor. So long as he had fresh underwear, he could worry about washing the rest once he got to Storybrooke.

Neal checked his cell phone again. If he hurried, he could catch the Greyhound at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, make connections in Bangor, and be in Storybrooke by mid-morning when the mysterious Mr. Gold opened his shop. Why an old-world wizard with the powers August had described would bother with pawned trinkets was a puzzle. But his brother-of-a-different-origin had raved how Mr. Gold had freed him from strings and splinters once and for all that very night.

*Just don't cross him,* August had warned. Well, Neal knew how to be endearing. When the magic man found the portal to reach Emma, he'd volunteer to fetch her himself.

That the nimble-fingered charmer who'd jumped into his joy ride by sheer chance should now be wandering around his fairy-tale birthplace made Neal's head spin. Forget texting and e-mail and phone tag and all the other mechanical rituals for communicating love. In the Enchanted Forest, they'd talk face-to-face of destiny, true love, and happily ever after.

Then he'd bring Emma back to his chosen world where they could enjoy a good pastrami sandwich, and she could tell him the big secret August had hinted she'd kept from him.
Neal spied the feathered, beaded dream-catcher he and Emma had rescued from their cheap Portland motel room. A sentimental keepsake, he knew, but the only one he truly cherished. Carefully, he packed it between the folds of his best blue shirt.

Entering his bathroom, swinging his duffel bag, Neal opened the medicine cabinet and picked through his toiletries. *I'm making good time.* Then he spied his black double-breasted suit and waistcoat hanging on the back of the door and stopped cold.

A decade earlier Reul Gorm had shown him a vision of Papa, once more human, free of the Dark One curse—indisputably his caring, dear, sweet self again. *But he does not remember you. Only by forsaking Emma and allowing her to fulfill her destiny will Rumplestiltskin and everyone else of the Enchanted Forest be freed from the curse of forgetfulness.* Sorrowfully, Neal had given in. Watching Papa spinning at his wheel, one thing had convinced Neal that Reul Gorm's tale of Storybrooke, Maine was true: Papa was wearing a three-piece suit.

Then a month ago—right after August's pigeon post announcement that the curse was broken—Reul Gorm had dashed Neal's hopes of a reunion. *I'm afraid your Papa is still very angry.*

Neal sighed. *Who could blame him?* Their last frantic moments together rattled in his mind: Papa quaking with fear while he nagged and taunted him, then left him behind.

*If only I could tell Papa how much I've sacrificed trying to fix it, I know he'd be the bigger man and forgive me.*

On the spur of the moment, Neal grabbed the suit. Maybe the remarkable Mr. Gold would know where in Storybrooke Papa was. In this day and age, there couldn't be that many men who knew how to spin.

*If I hang back and watch to see if I'm welcome—look for a sign that all is forgiven—it might help if I'm wearing a suit.*

Smee fumbled his key, trying to fit it into the outside lock of his basement apartment. He swayed a little, then bent to squint at the knob. Jiggling, he finally jabbed the key in and turned it. Leaning forward, he swept his door open, nearly falling. Then he staggered inside.

Cold, muddy, and deliciously drunk on Cisco 17.5 per cent alcohol by volume, Smee felt the satisfaction of a job well done. This was the only time in his life he'd ever acquired a hard-to-find-object and discarded it. *Good riddance!*

The first burn after he'd chatted up the Dark One had been bad enough. The zap he got after his dumpster attempt had been twice as strong. Well, nobody and nothing ever got a third go at him. He'd buried that bloody tin box so far off in the forest and so deep in the mud that nobody would ever stumble across it again.

Smee slammed the door shut, locked it and bolted it. *There.* He peeled off his damp navy peacoat and let it drop. *Goddamn Maine Novembers.* Oh, to be basking in the sun of Neverland again.

Whistling a sea chantey, he struck out across his bachelor flat, aiming for the bathroom and his one luxury—a claw footed tub.

Then he saw it, sitting right smack dab in the middle of his coffee table—the rusty biscuit tin. When the lid creaked open, revealing the white-hot light inside, Smee freaked. Shrieking, he raced to his door and groped for the deadbolt. Already, his trembling fingers were so sweaty they slipped. As he scrabbled to escape, the evil ray struck, sending a shock through his body that jittered his teeth.
When he came to, Smee was akimbo on his side—blood on his cheek from smacking the floor and a searing pain in the small of his back from where the box had scorched him. Shakily, he heaved himself into a squat and peered across the room.

In a moment, the box would speak to him in the sweet, cajoling voice of his dear departed Mum and ask him to do things his Mum would never have dreamt. This time he'd be a good little man and obey the dirty rotten cheating tin. What other choice did he have?

Smee whimpered. For the first time in his long, adventurous life, he'd managed to acquire a hard-to-get-rid-of object.

Gnawing off another juicy bite of barbecued rib, Emma said, "This is excellent." But I don't want the recipe. She thought it better not to ask what beast the boy who'd stayed behind had killed and roasted for the Lost Boys' midnight supper. He went by the odd name of Slightly and was slightly taller, slightly bonier, and a lot more conceited than his friends.

"Thanks. I'm the very best cook here. I remember how Mummy did it."

At Slightly's boast, three boys piled on top of him and started punching, tickling, and shouting, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

Mulan looked at them askance, then turned her attention to the Lost Boys' leader. "Tootles, you told us you've had comrades disappear—one by one—before you switched camps. But just because it hasn't happened here, doesn't mean this camp won't be found. Shouldn't someone be patrolling the perimeter? It's lack of discipline that's making you victims."

The green light by Tootle's ear jingled.

"Tink says not to listen to grownups."

"Even if we make sense?" Mary-Margaret asked.

"You picked a defensible location," Mulan went on, "and placing lookout posts in the trees is a good idea. But what help are they if nobody's manning them?"

Freckle-face—otherwise known as First Twin—looked sad. "I got lonely up there—"

"—all by myself," Second Twin finished, looking even sadder.

Poor kids. They should be manning a play fort, not a real one. "I'm finished," Emma said, throwing the bone into the fire. "Let me keep watch for a while."

"No! Stay!"

Before she had time to react, three boys were clinging to her.

"Are you a Mummy?" asked the skinny kid, Freebird.

"Do you have a boy?" asked the chubby kid, Rock.

"What's your name?" asked the redhead, Nibs.

Emma hugged all three. "Yes, I'm a Mom, my son is Henry, and I'm Emma."

The fairy-cum-jingle-bell tinkled.
Tootles frowned. "Emma Swan?"

Her stomach lurched. Hearing her full name from the lips of a strange little boy out in the middle of
the Fire Swamp at night in the land of fairytales a whole dimension away from the world she called
home was, well, eerie. "That's... me. How could she possibly know?"

Tinker Bell dinged once.

"Good guess," Tootles translated.

Chapter End Notes

I always thought Neal would have been more torn between anger at his papa for
breaking their deal and nostalgia for the gentle man who'd dedicated every waking
moment to working for him and caring for him. OUaT included so much sympathetic
detail for Rumplestiltskin in season 1 and the early part of season 2 that they had a hard
time tearing it down (though they did put a good amount of effort into it).
What Is This Place?

Chapter Summary

Tink is missing.

Mr. Gold reads a book.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Henry:** But what if I'm right? We know who they are. Now they have to know. *(Snow Falls)*

Emma found the Lost Boys' tree lookout post surprisingly snug—a hammock of vines slung just under the topmost leaves. The fact that her three supper companions had had to fly her up to it meant she was stuck here until someone saw fit to relieve her.

*That's okay.* Mulling over her odd conversation with the tinkling, twinkling green light gave her a lot to think about.

After long deliberation, she concluded, *Tinker Bell knew my full name because I'm the quote unquote savior.* Emma had to accept that after twenty-eight years of indifference, the universe—or universes—thought she was just plain awesome. She smiled to herself. *That's right. Saviors are awesome.*

And the minuscule fairy had been especially inquisitive about Henry: how old he was, what color his hair was, whether he liked to dance with his shadow. Well, the son of a savior was bound to be fascinating, too.

That Tinker Bell had been interested in Henry's father had been another matter. Grudgingly, Emma had disclosed they'd met in a hot-wired Volkswagen bug, which she'd explained to the Lost Boys as a land dinghy painted yellow. Describing Neal as a bastard had led to confusion but calling him a rodent of unusual size had finally gotten her point across.

Emma began another slow, purposeful scan of their environs. She'd never kept watch in a swamp before, but with her experience chasing bail bond jumpers, she was adept at scrutinizing crowds for the one person who looked out of place. The moon was bright enough that she could make out ROUS scurrying around just outside their camp. A bunch of would-be kidnappers negotiating pits of lightning sand and fire spouts would be easy to spot.

Suddenly, Tootles screamed, "Tink! Where are you?! Tink!"

"Seriously?" Emma muttered to herself. The Lost Boys' replacement for the legendary Peter Pan couldn't have betrayed the location of their camp more clearly if he'd tried. Thank goodness there weren't any enemies within sight let alone hollering distance.

After a few minutes of muffled, sleepy responses, Tootles' cries woke up his companions. Soon all of them were calling out to the missing fairy. In another minute, she saw the redheaded Lost Boy zooming up to her post.
As Nibs rose face-to-face with her, she was ready to scold him for the undisciplined shouting, but his look of distress stopped her.

"Tink's disappeared. She's gone." As he blurted out his words, he started to sink.

Emma grabbed the frightened boy by the arm and yanked him onto the hammock. "Get a hold of yourself. You can't fly in this state."

Nibs nodded, gulped, and slapped his cheeks.

"Are you sure she's missing? She's so tiny, she's easy to miss. Maybe she's just sleeping through the commotion."

Nibs shook his head. "Tink sleeps in a mitten by Tootles' head. When Tootles is on duty, she sleeps by me."

"Nobody’s breached the camp. I swear. I've been keeping lookout since you flew me up here."

"Hook did." Nibs pinched his nose to squelch a sob. "I don't know how, but he must've. First Poolie, then Guffie, then—" He reeled off so many names, Emma couldn't keep track. He finished with "— and now Tink."

"But where would he take her? What would he want with her?"

Nibs raised his shoulders in a helplessly ignorant shrug.

Emma had a hard time imagining the Captain Hook she'd met being patient enough to kidnap Lost Boys one-by-one—let alone a zigzagging fairy. But the alternative was worse—that lightning sand, flame spouts, or ROUS were to blame.

Emma slung her arm around the skinny boy's shoulders. "Where I come from, one hour isn't long enough to consider someone missing. My guess is that when you least expect it, Tinker Bell will turn up."

At six a.m., a half hour before sunrise, Neal stood outside the Greyhound Bus Terminal in Bangor, Maine, waiting for his eight-a.m. connection. Since he'd given up smoking, he had nothing to do but jam his hands into his pockets, stamp his feet, and wish his vintage felt coat had been designed for New England rather than New York. He had no change to buy a second cup of vending machine coffee. He hoped a place that took credit cards opened before he had to hop on the bus for Storybrooke.

Not that there was a bus for Storybrooke strictly speaking. The ticket taker had insisted no such place existed. The third driver-on-break he'd asked vaguely remembered a suggestion of civilization in the blank spot Neal indicated on his map.

_I don't recall the town's name_, the driver had said, _but I remember the diner. They always have a really hot dark-haired waitress—for as long as I can remember, and I've been driving the same route nearly thirty years. How such an out-of-the-way place keeps hiringlookers and why these lookers all look alike is beyond me. Oh, yeah. They make a really good burger._

If Neal wanted to get off before the end of the line, all he had to do was ask the driver and have his luggage handy. For now, it was safe in a locker. When he retrieved it, he'd haul it on the bus.

Pulling out his cell phone to check the time, he saw a green light just on the edge of his vision. _Can't_
be. When he whipped his head around to look, it was gone. He closed his eyes and rubbed them hard with his knuckles. He couldn't be sleepy—not if he wanted to keep a sharp lookout for Storybrooke.

Again, he caught the light—this time higher up. Faintly, he heard a jingle.

*Of all the times and all the places for Tink to show up!*

Neal bent his head as if studying his cell phone. If he waited for it... Yes. This time a brighter light flashed on his other side. He bent his head as if only by seeing his coat pocket could he slip his phone into it. Casually, he raised his free hand as if to scratch his ear.

Very close, he heard a tinkle. As fast as a cat, he cupped his hand around her—making sure to leave a hollow so as not to wrinkle her lacy fairy wings. "Gotcha! You little Christmas bell. How're the boys?"

Neal uncurled his fingers to smile at the butterfly-sized fairy lounging on his palm. As usual, she wore a tiny, green, strapless shift and ballet slippers that showed off her tiny shapely legs and tiny shapely breasts. When she'd first whisked him from the world-without-magic to Neverland, he'd developed quite a crush on the little lady. Though that had passed, he still found her awfully cute.

Ever since—for over two centuries of ever since—they'd been comrades in arms. They'd shared many battles before the hiatus when he'd mistakenly believed Hook's absence would be permanent. After he'd returned to the world-without-magic to seek a different sort of adventure, Tink would drop by just for fun.

A year ago, when Tink had anxiously reported Hook's return, Neal had discovered it was too late to rejoin the fight. He'd grown up. He'd met and lost the love-of-his-life. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't muster a thought happy enough to make him fly. Though Tink could have hauled him, Neal had begged off. He couldn't face his old friends flightless. But he could still relay advice.

"The Fire Swamp was a good idea? Hook hasn't found it?"

"No," she tinkled, "but someone else has. Guess!" She clasped her hands against her rosebud mouth as if to keep the secret from popping out. Then she threw her arms wide as if embracing the sky. "Oh, all right. It's Emma Swan."

Disconcerted, Neal sank back against the bus station's front window. "Emma—she's in the Lost Boys camp?" Wow. He'd just learned earlier this evening that she was in the Enchanted Forest. That his old crew had located her and were keeping her safe was... Wow.

"Yes! And she's waiting for you! She loves you! She true love loves you!" As she jingled out her exclamations, Tinker Bell jumped to her feet, flourished her wand, and shook twinkling fairy dust into Neal's face.

"Hey, cut that out. We've tried this, and—" But just as Neal was about to advise Tink to conserve her precious magic, he felt pressure leave the soles of his feet. Only an inch off the ground, but for the first time in ages he was floating. *Emma loves me.*

"She understands why I left?"

"Yes, yes, yes! She understands! The curse. Her destiny. True love. She understands it all!" Tinker Bell fluttered around Neal's head, sprinkling sparkles everywhere. "And there's more! There's more!"

When Neal looked down, he saw he'd risen a foot. "Wait!" Quickly, he scouted their location. The
strip mall to the left provided no cover. The park across the street was a postage stamp and residents of the neighboring apartment building might be dressing for work. He pointed diagonally across the nearest intersection. "There. The church."

Once more, Neal cupped his hand around Tink so she couldn't wreak more wonderment until they were safely out of sight. Pedaling through the air, he moved fast. **Some skills you never forget.** He caught a bleary-eyed truck driver doing a double take as he passed, but otherwise the streets were blessedly deserted. Up the steps to the churchyard and around the bushes, Neal opened his hands.

"What more?"

Tinker Bell hugged herself, bobbling with excitement. Her glitter enveloped Neal in a warm glow. "You and Emma have a boy! Henry! He's smart! He's brave! He can dance with his shadow!"

Neal's rush of joy was like a shot of helium. "Tink! I have a son!" When he looked down, he saw the church's white steeple and gray slate roof receding beneath him. His spirits rose even higher. **I'm airborne!** No need for a layover in Storybrooke to look up Mr. Gold. He was taking a direct flight to Emma. And when they returned and introduced Henry to Papa, a tear-soaked reunion was assured.

Fathers always forgave sons who gave them grandchildren.

---

The thought of his library waiting to be unpacked urged Mr. Gold out of bed, out of his house, down the several blocks to his shop, and into his office a full two hours before his usual time. Perched on his office chair, he was thankful his levitating skills were back and didn't require a complicated potion to wield. Within an hour, he'd relegated twenty-nine years of unsellable, unredeemed items to the nether reaches of his attic and filled the shelves of his office with a third of the collection that had graced the walls of his tower study at his Enchanted Forest estate.

His obligation to fulfill his deal with Prince Charming was uppermost on Mr. Gold's mind. A matter of pride, really. Not that he'd be unhappy to see the sheriff's badge on the inestimable Emma Swan rather than the wet-behind-the-ears prince. Snow White wasn't too unbearable, either—at least in her Mary-Margaret version. And if he accomplished the reunion, Belle would see his pledge to make amends wasn't an empty promise.

He stacked the remaining boxes to the side, confident he'd correctly identified and culled the dozen volumes on inter-universe intersections. They were the most thumbed, smudged, dog-eared, and creased of the lot. In years past, endless reading and rereading had convinced him that direct travel between the Enchanted Forest and Bae's world-without-magic was impossible without extinct flora such as the giants' beans. This despite the fact that Neverland, Wonderland, Oz, Narnia, and a number of even stranger realms were compatible enough for links and transports. That had left the catastrophically dark magic of the universe-ripping curse that had brought him to where he was now.

Crooking his finger, Mr. Gold summoned the first book, bound in scratched-up chimera hide and embossed with tarnished elf silver. Now that Storybrooke flowed with magic of its own, establishing a stable connection with the Enchanted Forest was surely doable. He opened to page one, ready to pore through the pages again with an open mind.

By mid-morning, Mr. Gold had determined that the odds were slim of locating a pre-existing portal like Alice's long-lost rabbit hole or a magic transport like the Pevensie family wardrobe. Creating a vortex, on the other hand, depended on wizardry, not chance. And since that was the kind of portal that had dragged the lost ladies to the Enchanted Forest in the first place, he knew it could work. Reul Gorm had laid claim to repairing Jefferson's portal-creating hat once sufficient fairy dust had been mined. Well, he'd show her who had the greater power.
By midday, Mr. Gold was staring dejectedly at a cauldron of still, calm water. If he couldn't create a vortex in the most versatile of all the elements, then what hope did he have of creating a whirlpool mighty enough to drill through time and space? He recalled what Dr. Hopper had said about his grasp of love-based magic: *Some spells come easily. Others are blocked.*

Mr. Gold pressed his forehead against his fingertips. That Emma had found her family and been ripped from it all in the same day was a tragedy. *My fault. Nobody's fault but mine.* With his hasty, thoughtless attempt at retribution, he'd accrued yet more damages against his name. Without magic, how could he make reparation? Owing someone—especially someone as surprisingly dear as Emma Swan—was the worst feeling in all the universes. Groaning, he shook his head. *I'm nothing but a useless, contemptible debtor. Lame. Friendless. Weak.*

Dr. Hopper's words from the night before whispered in his mind. *I think, maybe, I can help.*

Mr. Gold remembered what a relief it had been to talk with the counselor when Pinocchio had tricked him into believing he'd found his boy. Blindly, he fumbled in the inner pocket of his suit coat for his phone.

As Neal sailed under the noon sun, the sight of Neverland brought a nostalgic lump to his throat. Half lush jungle, half pine forest, ringed with white sand, and studded with snow-capped mountains—the island had everything. If he squinted really hard, he could see flecks of foam in the azure lagoon that just might be his friends the mermaids playing with the dolphins. And Tiger Lily? How was she doing?

He heard a jingle and lifted his head. Tinker Bell was flashing her green light on and off, alerting him that the sky portal was just ahead. He saluted in reply.

When he'd learned of the Storybrooke curse from August, he'd realized that thousands of Enchanted Forest residents being snatched to the Land Without Magic must have been the cause of the rift he was about to enter. If only he'd known that when Tink had first discovered it—about a year into Hook's absence—he wouldn't have spent so much of the next dozen years doing flyovers, hunting for clues as to why the castles lay in ruins, the towns sat empty, and the woods teemed with ogres. He wouldn't have spent so much time ridden with guilt, believing he'd abandoned his father to desolation. More than once Tink had had to haul him back to Neverland because he'd been too sad to fly on his own.

But at least the time he'd spent scouting the Fire Swamp had proven useful.

Abruptly, Tink's light disappeared. She'd entered the portal. Neal took one last glance at Neverland before following. Maybe Emma would enjoy a quick tour on their way back to earth.

Chapter End Notes

OUaT's wicked Peter Pan has his fans. This story takes a different turn.
What's Holding You Back?

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold takes Dr. Hopper up on his offer for counseling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Henry, Regina's Father: There was a man. Well, not quite a man (We Are Both).

Archie stood just inside the door, palms pressed together, while Mr. Gold limped across his office. "When you came here before, I only knew your Storybrooke identity," he said. "Today feel free to discuss anything—anything at all. The only way this works is if you talk. What you say doesn't leave this room. Just tell me what—what I should call you."

Archie watched Mr. Gold back up against the couch and give it the quick glance of the handicapped man who wants to make sure if his balance gives way, he won't crash. Gripping his cane, his client lowered himself carefully. Not until he was safely seated did he reply, "I prefer Mr. Gold. There's only one person in Storybrooke who can say Rumplestiltskin without sounding like she's spitting out the name of the devil."

"Okay." After all, I prefer Archie or Dr. Hopper to Jiminy Cricket. Quickly, he took his seat. "Let's dig right in. I think there's a lot to cover. On the phone you—you for ways to make the Storybrooke magic easier—easier for you to tap. I think maybe—maybe you have some doubts about yourself—"

"Whether I'm worthy of wielding magic based on love, sacrifice, and bravery?" Mr. Gold's tone was self-mocking, but Archie knew to expect that at the beginning of a session.

"Worthy is an interesting concept. And quite traditional. Just because you're not seeking tuition in this magic from a master who has to deem you worthy, doesn't mean you aren't using some form of measurement on yourself—"

Mr. Gold chuckled. "Oh, my, doctor. You found the root of the matter immediately. I'm unquestionably unworthy."

"No. That's not what I meant. You gave that answer too—too easily. Think a moment. Surely you can give me one—one positive."

"About myself? Well, I've never been a bully." Mr. Gold began tapping his good foot. "Oh, I've killed many—in self-defense, for retaliation, to best a rival, from paranoia, to get something I wanted, as a means to an end. But never for sport just because I could."

Archie kept his expression neutral as Mr. Gold ticked off his list. You already knew he's killed people. Move along. "Did—did you ever kill when you weren't under the Dark One curse?"

"Yes, once. To become the Dark One, I had to kill the previous Dark One."

"And only—only the once?"
Mr. Gold's gaze was penetrating. "What are you asking me, doctor? Whether I've killed anyone since—in Storybrooke?"

Archie steeled himself not to back down from Mr. Gold's stare. "As a counselor, I'm obligated to report any indication you plan to—to harm yourself or another person in the—the future. I'm obligated to keep confidential any—any act of harm you may have done in the—the past."

Mr. Gold gave him a sardonic grin. "Let me set your mind at ease. In Storybrooke I've done things that wouldn't stand up to the cold, hard scrutiny of the law, but I haven't done a single thing that has caused permanent harm."

_Caveat noted_, Archie said to himself. "So the Dark One curse. You took it on… voluntarily?"

Mr. Gold shrugged as if the choice had been inconsequential. "I made a deal I didn't understand."

"You must have had a—a very good reason."

"Oh, I did, yes. To save my son from being slaughtered in the Ogre Wars." He glanced at Archie, then closed his eyes. "You're calculating my age. Don't deny it. I know I gave you the century when I said I'd been indentured. Let me make it easy. I was born about three hundred years ago. I became the Dark One when I was fifty. The Ogre War in question is the second-to-last of countless."

Archie nodded. "The Frontlands Massacres. Yes. And you—you accomplished your goal—saving your son? From the battlefield?"

"No. On his fourteenth birthday, I slew the five men who'd come to conscript him. I saved him from ever going."

_Five men_. "That—that must have been a—a relief. And you kept other children from being conscripted. At least for—for a while."

"Not awhile. Forever. After I stopped the press gang, I went to the battlefield. I stopped the war."

Archie heard pride in Mr. Gold's voice and a touch of bitterness as well. "That's—that's quite an accomplishment. How did you—"

"With the powers I gained from the curse. When I took it on, not only could I run and leap again, I could appear and disappear in a puff of smoke, I could snatch weapons straight to my hand, I could fight like lightning—all on the first day. And when I'd hopped, skipped, and jumped to the battlefield, I discovered something else: I could understand what the ogres were saying."

"You could understand… I—I didn't know they had a language."

"Ogres are more human-like than you think. They're hunter-gatherers. They're able to talk, congregate, scheme…"

Mr. Gold blew out his breath. "Let me tell you about the honorable Duke of the Frontlands. Every spring he'd invite the rulers of the neighboring realms to observe what ogres could do. He'd muster the peasants' firstborn on the battlefield armed only with hoes and sickles. The ogre chief would muster some of his people as well. The ogres would slaughter the humans; then the Duke's archers would slaughter the ogres. With corpses to demonstrate the ogres' brutality, the Duke extorted hefty tributes from all of the rulers foolish enough to believe he was protecting their realms from suffering the same."

Mr. Gold sank back in his chair. "But it wasn't his archers that sent the ogres home. As well as
exacting children from the peasants, the Duke would collect a tithe of livestock as well—in exchange for not taking the peasants' second-born and so on. Then the Duke's men would drive the cattle into the forest where the ogres lived. That would satisfy the ogre chief until the next spring."

"You make it sound like—like a business transaction."

"A business transaction? Hah. It was a swindle. There's a difference, doctor."

"And you stopped it?"

"Yes. I surveyed the battlefield—the half-starved ogres bellowing, the peasant children trembling. And at the end of the ogre line I saw myself—the outsider, the ogre who looked out of place. He was snarling with the rest but with one ear cocked toward the Frontlands archers and the other toward the forest as if gauging when to run."

Mr. Gold smiled. "On the ridge above I saw the ogre lord—a self-satisfied fellow twice as fat as those he led. I felled him with a bolt of lightning straight from my hand through his soft blind eye. Then I sprang to the side of the sensible, cowardly ogre and said, 'I've killed your chief. Tell me who else needs to die before these poor dumb bastards acclaim you as their new chief and let you make a deal.'"

"A deal? You mean the truce—the ogre truce. That was—was you? But I thought—"

"For a quarter of a millennium that was me—though many royals claimed the credit. When two parties have something the other wants, a deal can always be struck. The wars began when human civilization encroached so far into ogre hunting grounds that game was scarce. In exchange for the land the humans had taken, the new ogre chief and all the chiefs after him accepted a thousand livestock a year to feed their people. I made similar deals with all the ogre tribes. Humans were granted peace."

"That's all it took—a fair deal?"

"Oh, I had to kill the Duke of the Frontlands and half a dozen of his lords. They couldn't understand why joining their confidence game held no value for me. After that, the next in line was quite happy to see matters my way."

"The only value to you was your son."

"My son and all the other sons and daughters of the Frontlands. I gathered them from across the battlefield, and I led them home."

"That was—"

"The last truly good thing I ever did."

"But you kept the truce in place."

"Well, yes. And as a fair deal, not a swindle. Except for…” Mr. Gold's voice trailed off. He shifted in his seat. "As go-between, I exacted a price, of course. Without the blood of slaughtered children to promote my services, I couldn't inflate my fee like the Duke of the Frontlands. I had to be reasonable. Each year, when the crocuses pushed up through the snow, I'd make the rounds of the realms at peril of ogre attack and collect their allotments of livestock. For my troubles, I'd choose a single treasured object from each ruler's court. Over the decades, the treasures added up." He shrugged.

"But that was—was an amazingly good thing. You did that truly worthy, positive thing with powers
you gained from—from the curse. And think what you didn't do. You never made yourself ruler. You never enslaved anyone."

"Well—"

Archie would not be interrupted. "You never started a war."

"Spare me the clumsy attempt at bolstering my self-esteem, doctor. I can't be praised for not doing things that just aren't my way." Mr. Gold shook his head. "A curse is a powerful thing, but it's the individual who determines how it manifests. Before I became the Dark One, I was a spinner known for dealing quality spools of thread at reasonable prices. Under the curse I became the sinister deal-maker who could fulfill one's wildest fantasies but at the risk of losing one's soul."

_Sinister deal-maker. Yes, I remember._ Archie moistened his lips. "That's—that's what you didn't understand about the—the deal you made for the curse. That the powers you'd gain would make you capable—capable of doing things—things that made you—" he swallowed "that made you feel you'd—you'd lost your—your soul."

"I never felt I'd lost my soul. Becoming the Dark One made my soul irrelevant."

"Oh. That's—that's—" Archie stopped. He didn't know what that was.

"You know, doctor, it's shocking how few people understood what magic was like in the Enchanted Forest. It was as elemental as water. It saturated everything. As the Dark One, I dissolved in it. With magic my body could do anything—run, dance, fly. No weapon could harm me. I couldn't die. Yet I had a thousand ways to punish anyone who dared to differ with me. Can you imagine how inferior and inconsequential that made everyone else seem?"

"That feeling would be a—a natural result of—of that set of circumstances."

"Circumstances? The absolute certainty of my superiority was intoxicating. Half the time I was giddy with it. I found everything and everyone simply hilarious. The main reason I continued making deals with humans for things I could easily conjure was that it amused me. The more they feared, hated, and scorned me—all the while still needing me—the more they made me laugh."

"You saw yourself as the outsider—the one who was out of place."

"Yes."

"Just as—as just as you did before. That's another way you—you as an individual determined how—how the curse manifested. It seems to take a person's tendencies and make them—make them extreme."

"Perhaps. But why that tendency?" Mr. Gold frowned, lost in thought. "I know you have no reason to believe me, except that I swear it's true: Before the curse I was different. I was gentle, I was kind. Why didn't the curse take those tendencies and amplify them?"

"Your love for your son—you were able to manifest that in a highly positive way while under the curse. Throughout everything, that love remained relevant to you."

"And when I lost him? Oh, doctor. You can't possibly know. The word extreme can't begin to describe… Ah, some of the things I did in my quest to find him…" Mr. Gold sighed, closing his eyes again.

As Archie studied his client, one thing puzzled him. It was more a practical, logistical matter than one
of the heart. "Your son… you're expecting to reunite with him here. If not in Storybrooke, then somewhere in this world. What makes you so certain?"

"Certain?" Mr. Gold grimaced, clearly reluctant to speak. "Let's just say I had access to the curse that brought us here. A small portion—a mere corner, really. I added a drop of true love magic in the name of Emma—so she would be the savior. And I added another in the name of Bae—so he would be here, and I would find him."

I had access. In Mr. Gold's careful words, Archie could sense a lot more than his client was letting on. Clearly, a fruitful area to explore. He remembered a curious thing he'd heard Mr. Gold say to Charming in his shop the day before: I spent nearly two-hundred-and-fifty years getting from the Enchanted Forest to here. Now Archie knew two-hundred-and-fifty wasn't a figurative number. Had Mr. Gold wanted to come? "That curse—the one that created Storybrooke. For you it was more of a—a blessing. It removed the Dark One curse."

"Not quite. It removed me—to a place without magic."

"Yes. And without magic, you've had the chance to—"

Mr. Gold locked eyes with Archie. "Become the man I was before? Hardly. I'm not exactly known in town for being gentle or kind. People fear me, hate me, scorn me—just like they did in the Enchanted Forest."

Mr. Gold's gaze was searching. I have to speak carefully if I'm going to help him find any answers, Archie thought. "But people are no longer inconsequential to you. You see their value again and—and you like that. Your soul no longer feels—feels irrelevant."

"Maybe. But could I ever be the man Bae used to love?" Mr. Gold fidgeted with his cane. "I've made enemies over the years—most of them deserved. For me, weakness would be deadly. I don't value others so highly that I won't defend myself. I'm not above preemptive action if I'm threatened. And revenge still feels to me like the virtue of equity."

"Perhaps you haven't been a—a saint, but it—it means something to you that you—that you haven't caused anyone, uh, permanent harm."

Mr. Gold returned a faint smile.

"And now, after so many years without it, you've—you've made Storybrooke a place with magic—but of a—a different sort."

"To help me find Bae."

"And the magic you've brought—it's quite powerful."

"Yes. According to my long years of study, true love is the most powerful magic that has been identified in all the known universes."

"But you're unfamiliar with it. You don't know its limits. For some spells that may be what's holding you back—the anxiety that this new magic may have no limits. Without limits, everything could seem inferior and inconsequential again."

Mr. Gold exhaled slowly. "Even love can be perverted." He lowered his head. "I can't choose Regina's path. If I renounce magic completely, I'm afraid I'll never find Bae."

"I think—I think everyone's path is—is different. As Pinocchio's godfather, I'd be the least likely to
ask you to—to renounce magic. Instead, perhaps you can set—set your own limits. You're doing it already in your unconscious when you—when you experience a block. But that's—that's the least effective approach. If you make the process conscious, you can base your limits on—on how you'll use the magic rather than on—on what magic will be available to you."

"But why would my unconscious block me from magic involving portals?"

"Think about it. Where do you want to open a portal to? You're wary of the magic in Storybrooke because you're not—not sure how you'll handle it. Think of how your unconscious must be—must be rebelling at the possibility of linking to the Enchanted Forest. You know what its magic would do to you. I think every fiber of your being wants to—to avoid the Enchanted Forest at all costs—never have anything to do with it ever, ever again."

"But I don't have any intention of going through a portal to the Enchanted Forest—just of calling Emma and Mary-Margaret back to this side of it."

Archie nodded. "Make a deal with your unconscious that under—under no circumstances will you ever—ever go back to the Enchanted Forest, back to where the Dark One can manifest in you again. Resolve that inner conflict and maybe the magic will begin to flow."

As Mr. Gold hobbled down the sidewalk from Dr. Hopper's office toward his shop, their long conversation replayed in his mind, blocking out the usual grunts and glares of passing Storybrooke citizens. But when he heard a loud report—almost like a gunshot—he looked up. He scanned the street for the source of the sound. Seeing the ancient white Impala of the youngest son of a fish monger chugging by, he said to himself, Car backfire.

Nearing his shop, Mr. Gold reached for his keys. With a quick glance down, he noticed an odd frayed hole in his breast pocket and stopped to inspect it. Was this there the whole time I was talking to Hopper? Embarrassing.

When Mr. Gold took a side trip home to change, he discovered something even stranger—identical round holes in the front and back of each layer of clothing. It was as if someone had sneaked into his house and skewered the complete outfit he'd laid out for himself the night before. The thought was disconcerting.

Well, this would be a good test of Dr. Hopper's proposed strategy—setting conscious limits on his use of magic in order to unblock some of its forms that had frustrated him lately like barrier spells to protect his property. If he made a deal with his unconscious that whatever spell he conjured would not, under any circumstances, turn intruders into marble statues like the spell that had secured his Enchanted Forest estate, perhaps he could finally provide reasonable protection for his home and shop.

Chapter End Notes

I have to admit, this chapter is one of my favorites. I wish the show had included more counseling scenes between Dr. Hopper and Mr. Gold (and a couple of ones with Regina).
Chapter Summary

Emma reacts.

Granny Welds.

Belle sighs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Somewhere You've Been Before

Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold): Love makes us sick. Love has killed more than any disease (7:15 A.M.)

At first light, the Lost Boys and their prisoners-turned-allies had started an earnest hunt for the missing fairy. Surreptitiously, Emma had outlined the basics of a grid search to the three women and each had agreed to shepherd four of the boys. They hadn't announced this arrangement formally to avoid an anti-grownup backlash.

Now that it was dusk, Emma's greatest fear had come true. One of her charges was in big trouble. If not for the lucky chance that Slightly had picked up a long stick to whack Freebird for taunting So's your mum, he'd have been long gone down the lightning sand pit rather than just up to his armpits. As it was, Freebird's grip on the other end of the stick was the only thing saving Slightly from a quick burial.

Six snarling ROUS and the wriggly twins she was clutching under her arms prevented Emma from lending a hand. On the off chance that their Great Dane build meant the rats-on-ultra-steroids were doglike, Emma instructed the twins through gritted teeth, "Don't run. Don't show them your backs. Don't look them in the eyes."

Emma heard a pop, followed by a blow torch blast from a fire spout. Startled, Freebird lost his grip. As he scrambled forward to grab the stick, Emma's stomach lurched. Just as it was sliding off the edge of solid ground, he caught it again—barely.

Of all the ironic things, Emma heard Tootles' distant shout, "Tink! It's Tink! She's here!"

Great. In trying to find her, one of her comrades was about to be lost. Maybe if I get the ROUS to chase me, then the twins can help Freebird pull Slightly out.

Then she heard, "And she's got Peter! Peter! Peter!"

Peter Pan?

Images of the dashing, plucky, talented, pint-sized hero flooded Emma's mind. Without thinking, she shouted: "Peter! Help! Slightly's slipping down a sinkhole!"
She craned her neck in the direction of Tootles' cries. Soon, a figure zoomed over the top of the trees.

It wasn't the Peter Pan of the stories.

It wasn't the intrepid lad dressed in green.

It was that goddamn, double-crossing, no-good, son-of-a-bitch Neal Cassidy.

For the second evening in a row, Smee kneeled before his coffee table, staring at the open biscuit tin. "I shot him," he repeated nervously, "but he just kept on walking. He may look like a man, but he's the Dark One through and through."

"Maybe you missed…" The soft, sweet voice drifted out from the white light.

Smee swallowed hard. "I—I didn't miss. I was within 300 yards. I could have hit him with a musket, let alone my Ruger."

"Maybe, just to be sure, you should try again…"

Smee remembered how his stomach had heaved when Mr. Gold, instead of crumpling, had calmly scanned the street. He couldn't go through that again. "No! I barely ducked down the alley as it is. I'm not cut out for this. I'm not an assassin. I'm more of a procurer, more a middle man type." As the lid creaked up, he began to shake. "No, no, no. Wh-wh-why don't you try your ray on him? Maybe magic—"

Gentle laughter billowed from the rusty box. "If dark magic is protecting him again, then no form of counter-magic can affect him—save one… but I want to make sure…"

Smee pulled his red cap down over his ears, but it couldn't block out the box's coaxing request.

"Tomorrow, be my good little man and hit him with something bigger."

As Neal crested the trees, he broke into a ridiculously boyish grin. The bastard! Emma thought. For an instant, his eyes met hers—sparkling as if he'd just returned with beer and pizza rather than after eleven years of not a single word of explanation. He turned before she could glare at him.

Without missing a beat, he swooped down, plucked Slightly one-handed from the lightning sand, swung him in an aerial victory dance, and perched him in a swamp cypress. Jubilant at being rescued, Slightly applauded. Below him, Freebird jumped up and down. "Me, too, Peter! Me, too!" Neal grabbed his outstretched hands, tossed him skyward, caught him, and parked him alongside Slightly.

Emma struggled to get a tighter grip on the twins. Not only is Neal Cassidy a goddamn, double-crossing, no-good, son-of-a-bitch—he's a show off.

For lack of Tinker Bell and her magic dust, none of the Lost Boys had flown all day. Now they were acting as though Neal's hot-dogging antics were the first they'd seen of the art. When the twins began squirming in different directions, she snapped, "Cut it out!"

As the words left her mouth, First Twin pried her fingers off his elbow and Second Twin chomped down on her wrist. "Ouch!" Breaking free from Emma's protective embrace, they lit out toward Neal, shouting. "Peter! Peter! Peter!"
And the rodents of unusual size started after them.

"Neal!" she shrieked.

"Winslow, Arizona," he called back as he shot toward the twins.

Emma's mind flashed on the 2001 June morning when a side trip to the Jackson Browne statue had turned into an impromptu rescue of a tabby from a mob of stray dogs. She snatched a rock off the ground and pitched it at the biggest rodent, all the while snarling and growling to get its attention.

The ROUS squealed. She kept the rocks flying as fast as she could find them. When the pack turned away from their prey to size up who was pelting them, Neal scooped up the twins. The double load didn't slow him down as he flew them to safety with their friends.

Emma experienced one blessed moment of relief.

But that left her facing six unusually sized rats. It had been bad enough when they'd been snarling but keeping their distance. Seeing them pant and edge toward her was far worse. When she'd been holding two wriggling boys, she must have looked like a menacing three-headed beast. Now that they could see she was one human being with one vulnerable neck, saliva was dripping off their fangs.

Emma didn't dare bend down for another stone. Instead, she steeled herself to the same advice she'd tried to give the twins: *Don't run. Don't show them your back. Don't look them in the eyes.*

Then, unexpectedly, Neal dropped from the sky on the other side of the pack, fell to his knees, and whistled. When the ROUS hesitated, then looked behind them, he smiled and held out his hands as if he were offering them tickles.

"Hey, guys, don't be shy," he murmured in sweet, caressing tones.

As the huge rats turned toward their new potential dinner, Emma's mouth dropped open. Though ROUS were dog-sized, that didn't mean they had dog natures. "Neal! Stop messing around!"

He added kissy noises. "Come to Papa."

"Nooooo," Emma moaned.

Neal waggled a cautionary finger at her and continued cooing at the ROUS. Emma's pulse pounded in her ears. Then, barely louder than the *thud, thud, thud* of her heart, she caught the sound of the ROUS cooing back.

Neal patted his knees, and the beasts came trotting. In a moment, they surrounded him. They bumped and nuzzled. The largest rolled over on its back, and he scratched its furry belly.

*Just like that pack of mangy curs in Winslow.*

Cheers broke out in the cypress above Neal and from the stand of trees across the clearing where the rest of the Lost Boys and Emma's companions had gathered.

*Damn you, Neal Cassidy.* She sank to the ground, sobbing.

"Got 'em," Granny announced. "Now I can get to work."

Looking up from refilling ketchup bottles, Ruby sighed. *Thank goodness.* Oblivious to the curious
stare of their first customer of the evening, Granny strode through the diner lugging the blow torch and protective gear she'd sworn she'd hustle up by nightfall. Ruby answered Belle's questioning glance with a smile, and her friend returned to reading.

"I told you Gold's was a waste of your time," Granny added and disappeared into the pantry.

At her ex's name, Belle's head popped up again. Just as quickly, she lowered it to stare at her novel.

But you're not fooling me, Ruby thought. She strolled down the row of booths, plunking a full ketchup bottle on each table. When she reached her friend, she slid onto the opposite seat. "It wasn't really a waste of time."

With the same mock casualness her ex-boyfriend had displayed the day before, Belle cocked her head and asked, "What wasn't a waste?"

"Going to Mr. Gold's. He enchanted my wolf charm to glow when I located something in his shop that used to be mine. I found a bow and arrow set Granny made me when I was a kid. I just didn't find the thing I was looking for."

"The thing?"

Ruby paused. She'd feel a lot better telling Belle the full story tomorrow after she found out whether she'd regained the ability to retain her human consciousness after shape shifting—as she hoped—or whether she'd once again be pure ravening wolf as Granny feared. "Kind of a protective cloak… no big deal. Mr. Gold is going to enchant my scarf to replace it. Isn't that nice of him?"

Belle released a little "mmm" of agreement and took a bite of salad.

Ruby laughed and poked her friend. "You're as bad as he is. The whole time I was in his shop, he was dying to ask about you. At first, I wasn't going to say anything. Then I just had to put him out of his misery."

Belle took a quick gulp of iced tea. "What did you tell him?"

"Oh, that your boyfriends are running you ragged."

Appalled, Belle whispered, "You didn't."

"Of course, not. I told him the truth. You're busy working, reading, and doing Zumba." Ruby smiled. "Now go on. Ask me about him."

Belle shook her head. "You're awful."

But you want to know, don't you? "Well, he told me things have settled down. No more harassment, break-ins, anonymous phone calls."

"Thank goodness." Belle inhaled deeply. "That was horrible—I knew when everyone had a chance to—well, helping Dr. Whale had to impress people. Anyone could see he's changed…" Her words trailed off awkwardly.

Before her friend had a chance to retreat again, Ruby reached over and closed her book. "Come on, admit it. You miss him."

"So help me, I do..."

Ruby leaned forward. "Anything you want to share?"
Belle pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Am I blushing?"

Like a rose. "There's something else I forgot to tell you. In his shop yesterday, he was wearing his black suit, blue shirt, red tie combo. He looked really hot."

"You should see him in leather pants." Belle sighed.

Leather pants?

Belle clasped her hands. "But I don't know what to do. When we were living together, Rumple was on edge the whole time—afraid to go beyond chitchat, afraid to say the wrong thing. It was like he couldn't get past how he'd felt when he believed I was gone forever. Every time I'd leave for a stroll, he looked like he expected to never see me again. When I'd return, he'd fall all over himself being cheerful when I knew what he really wanted to ask was why I hadn't just kept on walking."

Wow. "He sounds… insecure."

"It was as if he didn't truly believe I had come back. He was more at ease staring at my chipped cup and thinking about me than he was being with me."

Ruby thought of her long-lost beau. Fearing one's true love is gone forever was nothing like knowing it. One of these evenings, when the moon wasn't full and she had a really large bottle of wine, she'd confess the whole tragic tale to her friend. If Belle could see how lucky she was, she might give Mr. Gold another chance.

Suddenly, the door burst open. Six dwarfs, the head fairy, and Sheriff Charming crowded in, followed by little Henry.

"Drinks all around!" Happy shouted. "I'm buying!"

Belle fanned her cheeks a moment and put on a pleasant smile.

Ruby shot her a commiserating glance, then popped out of the booth to greet her customers. She hoped they wouldn't ask her about the banging and clanging coming out of the pantry. Granny needed to concentrate if she was going to weld the chains to the wall properly. Neither she nor Ruby wanted the slightest chance of loosing a hungry wolf on Storybrooke's populace. Glancing at the wall clock, she noted, Just two hours until moon rise.

Grumpy dropped his pickax on the counter. "We struck fairy diamonds. Lots and lots."

Neal ruffled fur, scratched ears, and patted heads, trying to accommodate all six snuggling ROUS—but his attention was on Emma. Hearing from Tinker Bell that she still loved him had made him as light as air. Seeing the evidence of her tears made him want to do loop-the-loops around the moon.

"Hey guys," he whispered to the rats. "That's my girl over there. Isn't she gorgeous?"

And she was. The kitten he'd adored eleven years earlier had become a lioness. No more black-rimmed glasses, no more tame ponytail. Her blonde hair was a wild mane around her magnificent face. And when she'd swept the tears from her deep brown eyes, he could see them flash.

Before Neal could extricate himself from the playful ROUS and go to her, the four comrades he'd rescued clambered down from the cypress and the rest hurried over from where they'd been watching. Soon lads he hadn't seen in sixteen years were pinching his biceps, poking his stubble-covered chin, and grabbing his hands to arm-wrestle. They looked the same age but thinner and
dirtier than the last time he'd seen them. Clearly, Tink's attempts to keep him abreast of Hook's newest campaign against his crew hadn't told the whole story.

"You're Peter Pan?"

Looking up, Neal saw a sweet-faced, athletic young woman about Emma's age with tousled black hair. When he nodded, the woman grinned.

"I'd shake your hand—no. I'd kiss you right now if I could get close enough. That was—"

"Heroic!" exulted the frail beauty next to her in the tattered princess robes. "Simply heroic!"

"Solid maneuvers," added the solemn but equally pretty armor-clad woman next to her.

The kind words made Neal both happy and bashful. It had been a long, long time since he'd done anything worthy of praise. But he wouldn't really believe it till he heard it from Emma. Looking past his three new admirers, he saw her striding purposefully toward him.

Why does she look so mad?

As soon as their eyes met, Emma began spluttering a stream of swear words. She didn't stop until she'd pushed between the princess and the soldier, wound her arm back, and let her fist fly.

The punch hit Neal squarely on the jaw, sending him sprawling on his backside. His comrades tumbled around him. The ROUS scattered.

"Emma! What in the world—?" the black-haired woman began.

Neal rubbed his jaw, staggered at the love of his life's wallop. And she was still seething.

"You want to know what I'm doing? Just introducing you to the son-of-a-bitch that knocked me up and ditched me to rot in jail."

Son-of-a-bitch? "I thought you… understood."

"That you sold me out."

Sold you out?

"Took the money and ran."

Took the money?

"Left me with nothing but a broke ass car."

Neal propped himself to a sitting position. At least she got the car.

"Stole my self-respect, my youth, my sanity. Yes, I understand."

"But I had to. At least, I thought I—"

Emma planted her hands on her hips. "Oh, really? You had to? You had to leave me so rock bottom that the only thing I could give my son was a clean break in the hope he'd be adopted by a nice family?"

"You—you gave our son up for adoption?"
"You're surprised? Seriously?" Emma locked her arms across her chest as if that was the only way she could stop herself from hitting him again. "Wait till you hear who adopted him: a sociopathic bitch known as the Evil Queen!"

Dismayed, all Neal could do was stare. He heard a pop. A dozen yards behind Emma, fire spouted into the sky. Its fury wasn't worse than the look on her face.

The black-haired woman patted Emma's shoulder. "Darling, maybe if we all calm down—"

Emma pulled away. "Not now, Mother."

Mother? "August and Reul Gorm told me it was the only way. I shouldn't have listened to them. But the curse—"

"The curse?! So you were in on that, too? Let me tell you about my curse: it's you."

Neal heard the heartbreak in Emma's rage. The bliss he'd felt since morning disintegrated like the sand castle of wishful thinking it had always been.

Tootles gripped his shoulder. "Don't talk to Peter that way. He may have grown up, but he's still our leader."

"Grown up? Hah. Stop kidding yourself. And leader? He ditched you—the same way he ditched me and ditched my son. What kind of leader does that?"

Neal released his breath like a deflating balloon. "Oh, Emma. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Let me explain—"

"Save it." Her face was rigid with hurt and anger. "You want to know why you get along so well with the ROUS? It's because you're the biggest rat of all." Stiffly, she about-faced and marched off toward the trees.

Glancing miserably at Tootles, Neal saw his untrustworthy little fairy friend standing on his shoulder—one hand on her hip, the other extended in a shrug.

"Like I said," Tink jingled. "Emma true love loves you."

Chapter End Notes

I was super disappointed when "Manhattan" showed Neal more indignant that Emma hadn't tracked him down to say she was pregnant (from prison, no less) than Emma was allowed to express to him for ditching her. IMHO, that mismatch of expectations was the first step on the road to ruining the glory that could have been Swanfire.
No One's Claimed Him

Chapter Summary

The first night of the full moon and the morning after.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mulan: We’re survivors. (We Are Both)

Late that night, Snow White sat between Mulan and Aurora as a guest at Peter Pan's campfire. Since she'd already heard the story of the dozen Lost Boys who were now lost from their companions, she took the time to ponder a different story. Emma had never provided details about Henry's father—neither when they were two single women sharing a loft nor when they'd discovered they were mother and daughter. As Snow watched the grownup spirit-of-youth hold his solemn powwow, she realized Emma was far from knowing the full story, too.

On the one hand, she was happy to learn Emma's statement Henry's father was no hero wasn't strictly true. The Lost Boys saw Peter Pan's return as the hope that good would triumph over evil and their missing members would soon be found. And his presence wasn't so bad for Emma and her either. If he'd flown to the Fire Swamp from Maine, then surely, he could fly them back—even if it took him two trips. If her daughter wanted to see Henry again, then she could hold her anger for one flight.

On the other hand, that anger had been pretty upsetting to witness. Snow White had been stunned at the depth of pain this over-sized child had caused her daughter. He certainly had some explaining to do.

Hearing a swooshing noise, Snow looked up. For the third time, Freebird, Nibs, and Rock swooped down from the treetop lookout post without Emma. Evidently, they hadn't been able to talk her out of taking yet another shift on watch. Her daughter had stranded herself up there since before dinner, refusing to take anything except a canteen and a handful of roasted pumpkin seeds. Well, she has a lot to mull over.

The three hovering boys sheepishly shook their heads and drifted down into their previous positions in the circle. In the flickering light of the campfire, Snow saw Peter Pan's forehead knit mournfully as he squinted at the uppermost branches of Emma's tree. Then his expression became grave and resolute again as Nibs resumed his account of their capture of the four women.

"It was really more of a rescue," Aurora interjected.

"Tink thought they were Hook's wenches," Nibs explained.

The twinkling green light jingled, and Tootles automatically translated, "A mistake."

"Yeah, Tink's made a lot of them lately," Peter Pan mumbled.

In a few more minutes—to the Lost Boys' evident disappointment—their leader wrapped up the powwow with, "You've given me a lot to think about."
We'll hear his plans tomorrow, Snow thought.

Standing, he gathered the boys into a huddle. Then he looked over his shoulder and nodded for the women to join them.

Snow wedged herself in, slipping an arm around Slightly and stooping to slip her other around Curly.

Peter glanced around the tightly knit group. "I guess, under the circumstances, the cheer *Grownups spoil everything* would be out-of-place. Do you guys remember the one about the Musketeers?"

Snow saw Mulan and Aurora exchange quizzical looks, but she knew they'd catch on quickly enough.

"Okay. Ready, set—*All for one! And one for all!*"

By the ninth repeat, Snow felt a surge of warmth and solidarity. For the last three shouts, the chorus of voices seemed to her a promise that everything would turn out right in the end.

Snow hoped Emma was listening.

---

Prince Charming urged his prancing white stallion through an endless grove of silver birches. Everything looked familiar, yet somehow strange. For a moment, he wondered at the complete absence of sound. Then he heard what he expected: crows cawing and crickets chirring.

*That's more like it. I'm really home.*

But the farther he pressed on, the more difficult the way became. The trees crowded together. Low branches snatched at his linen shirt. Brambles scratched his leather pants. Finally, his mount shied and reared, balking against taking another step.

*I must keep going.* Something—no, someone—was waiting for him in the sunlight just ahead.

"Snow! I will find you. I will always find you."

In the next instant, Charming was off his horse, tearing through the underbrush. Up ahead, between a pair of sun-dappled oaks, stood a raven-haired beauty. He began to run, pounding up the mossy path.

As his true love reached out to him, seven warbling bluebirds fluttered down to perch on her silken arms. Her forest-green eyes opened, and her apple-red lips parted...

"Gramps! Gramps!"

As the dream shattered, Charming groaned. Groggily, he opened his eyes. By the full moon shining through the window, he could make out his grandson's pale face. "Hey, Henry. Another nightmare? Want me to sit with you? Light a candle?"

At the word *candle*, Henry winced. "No. No fire."

The anxiety in the whispered words brought Charming fully awake. "The chamber of flames? You could feel the heat?"

Nodding, Henry clambered onto the bed. Charming made room for his grandson to burrow under the covers. "The woman was there again—crying. This time she looked right at me. I tried to reach her. I couldn't."
Charming hugged his arm around his grandson. "No need for heroics. It's only a dream." I wish. In any event, whoever that woman was didn't need to pull an eleven-year-old kid into her problems.

Henry sucked in his breath. "A dream? I don't know about that. Tonight, something else happened...something that..."

But before he could say what, the dum-dum of "Law and Order" sounded from Charming's nightstand. "What in the—?

"Isn't that cool?" Despite his nightmare, a touch of Henry's usual enthusiasm had crept back into his voice. "When you were in the shower last night, I gave each of your contacts its own ringtone. That one's police emergency."

"Oh!" Before the next repeat, Charming reached across Henry and grabbed his phone. "Hello?"

Immediately, Granny blurted out, "Ruby's gone."

Charming sat up. "You mean she's not—" he glanced at his grandson "—where she planned to spend the night?"

Granny's sharp breath sounded like a sob. "I left her to drop the day's cash in the night deposit. Then I stopped at the bed and breakfast to pick up the orders for this morning. When I got back, I found the lock popped on the pantry door, the manacles snapped, and gashes on the walls. No Ruby."

"Don't panic. We'll find her." We'd better. As Charming spoke, he slid away from Henry across the mattress and swung his legs to the floor. "Stay at the diner. I'll pick you up in the cruiser."

"I won't wait long," Granny warned. "Hurry."

The call ended. Charming stripped off his pajamas and scooped yesterday's clothing off the floor. Not until he was buttoning his shirt did he turn back to his grandson.

"Someone needs your help," Henry said. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Charming gnawed his lower lip. "I'm not leaving you alone—not for long, anyway. I'm calling Regina." The ex-queen might be evil, but she'd never allow any harm to come to his grandson. As he scrolled his list of numbers, wondering what ringtone Henry had assigned his adoptive mother, Charming asked, "What was the something else you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh, nothing important." Henry slipped out of bed. Clutching his wrist, he padded over to the kitchen area. "The ice-maker's working, isn't it?"

---

Early the next morning, when Mr. Gold limped down the sidewalk away from the Charming family loft, he found himself smiling. Keeping his balance was a challenge, but his heavy antique leather satchel made him feel like a physician returning from a house call. First Dr. Whale's arm, then Pinocchio's inanimation, and now Henry's night terrors—Storybrooke's residents would soon see that when the problem was dire, the man of magic was the one to call. Almost as if I'm worthy.

Telling Regina—But this is for Henry, this one's on me—had made him feel particularly grand. And dealing with the boy had been a pleasure. When Mr. Gold had conjured a healing blue shimmer to magic away the red, puckered burn on his wrist, Henry hadn't even blinked. When he'd offered the enchanted potion vial that would grant him control in the Sleeping Curse Netherworld, he'd looked excited.
Indeed, Emma's son has courage. Something about his eyes reminded Mr. Gold of Bae.

As he rounded the corner onto the main street, he saw a commotion up the block at Franklin's Garage. Though he never had need of mechanics himself, he knew everyone who worked there—both as their Storybrooke landlord and as the wizard who had once charmed the lot of them into posing as Cinderella's servants and coach horses back in the Enchanted Forest. If Ella's family home hadn't been blessed with such a large assortment of sapient rodents, he might not have pulled off her temporary transformation into highborn lady at all.

Mr. Gold paused, reluctant to extend his walk with a detour but troubled as to why the receptionist and office manager were weeping and why the owner and his three mechanics looked angry.

Sighing, he carefully lowered his magic case to the sidewalk and reached for his cell. "Dial Franklin's." Not until nine rings did he see the owner look over his shoulder and hurry into his office.

"Hello, this is—"

"Jaq Franklin, yes. This is Mr. Gold."

"Was something wrong with our check?"

Why does everyone think I live to discuss rent? "No, it cleared. That's not the reason I'm calling. I happen to be down the street from your garage, and I can see some kind of disturbance. I wanted to ask—"

"Except for the rent, I don't think anything here is your business."

Mr. Gold closed his eyes. As he'd told Dr. Hopper, People fear me, hate me, scorn me—just like they did in the Enchanted Forest. Jaq the Mouse had just demonstrated the last two-thirds of the equation. He needed to remind him of the first.

"As the biggest patron of Avalon Chauffeur Services, I can see to it that they're no longer your business." He waited for Jaq to think that over.

"Okay. News like this won't stay quiet for long anyway. Gus, uh, Billy was murdered last night. It was gruesome. I really don't want to talk about it."

Murdered? "No, of course not," Mr. Gold said quickly. "My condolences—"

Jaq ended the call without further comment.

Billy. Wasn't that the young tow truck driver who liked to hang around Ruby? Mr. Gold bit his lip as he slpped his phone into his coat. He’d assumed the lovely wolf would chain herself up for the night. Had the lock failed?

Fear, hate, scorn. He was used to such treatment. He didn't like to think of Belle's best friend subjected to the same.

Positioning his cane for stability, Mr. Gold stretched down for his satchel. As quickly as he could, he turned away from Franklin's and hobbled toward his shop. If only he'd given priority to enchanting Ruby's scarf the day before, this tragedy might not have happened. At least he could provide her some protection before the moon rose again tonight.

---

That damn tin is going to get me fired. Yesterday, its demand Smee play trigger man had required
him to fake the heaves at lunchtime and skip work early. Today's mission to hit Mr. Gold with something bigger had required him to call in with the flu. If his search for a car to jack took him down the same streets as Moe's deliveries, he'd be looking for a new job.

Not that he expected anyone in this neighborhood to order a dozen roses. He was trawling the crap side of town—fences needing slats, roofs needing shingles, garages needing paint. One block over, in a shed with a busted window, he'd lucked out finding a cordless drill all powered up plus a flathead screwdriver and a pair of torn but thick gloves. If he could just find a clunker that wasn't up on blocks, he'd be sailing.

Smee passed two more houses with overgrown yards and mud driveways before he saw it—a true galleon of a car with three windows per side, massive chrome bumpers, and a belligerent figurehead atop its prow. The medallion on the front identified it as a Pontiac, the chrome writing on its port-side as a Streamliner Wagon.

Pity such a shipshape ride would soon be involved in a crash.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter fills in some detail, some transition, before the dramatic second night of Wolfstime.
Mr. Gold studied the fringed checkered scarf laid out on his work table. The colors were fortunate—
black like the night and silver like the moon. The trick was to concoct the right potion to infuse it
with the power to prevent Ruby from turning until she'd regained her confidence in controlling the
changes herself. Happily, his store of magical herbs—like the citizens of Storybrooke—had not aged
during the long years of the curse. He was certain he had some wolf's bane somewhere.

Twisting to the shelf behind him, he summoned the ancient, rat-chewed volume he'd mentioned to
Dr. Hopper: The Ins and Outs of Transformation.

He cast his gaze down the table of contents. He'd never enchanted an object to arrest a
transformation before. It would have helped if Ruby had known whether her family's shape shifting
was an inherent trait or a perpetuated curse. For that matter, she could be descended from a long line
of sapient wolves. In that case, the human guise she carried off so beautifully for all but a few
moonlit hours per month could be the aberrant state. For all he knew, her natural form could be the
wolf.

By late morning, Peter Pan still hadn't given the Fire Swamp camp a plan. In fact, he hadn't emerged
from the vine-draped lean-to where he'd spent the night. When Slightly had walked in with his
breakfast, he'd walked out with it uneaten.

Emma wouldn't eat, either, Snow thought. But at least she'd surrendered her marathon on watch duty
and was now asleep. Was Peter sleeping, too?

Snow folded her arms. Time for explanations. Putting on her most authoritative fourth grade teacher
face, she strode up to the littlest Lost Boy Alfie who was playing sentry. She snapped out a salute
and—before he could object—swept back the snarled vines and entered Peter's sanctum.

He was sitting cross-legged on his grass mat, clasping his head, looking more lost than the boys
outside.

"So," she began, "my grandson's father is Peter Pan. I've read about you."
He raised his head. "Good or bad?"

"A little of both."

He gave her a lopsided smile. "And you're Snow White. Back in the Earth dimension, you have a rep, too. But you don't look like the pushover everyone says."

"Thanks." Snow brushed off the other mat and sat. "If you're talking about the cursed apple, the Evil Queen didn't fool me into eating it. I took a bite so she'd spare Charming's life."

"The Evil Queen." Peter groaned. "That's who Emma said adopted our son."

"Not as bad as it sounds. Henry's the one person she'd never harm. She truly loves him."

Peter sagged. "She's probably not a worse parent than I would have been."

Snow studied him. The dimples that had flared from the corners of his brown eyes when he'd zoomed up the day before were gone. Instead, dejection lined his forehead as it had when Emma had stomped off. "Now I know how you differ from your storybook version. You're not conceited."

"What do I have to be conceited about? Every course I've ever taken in my life has been wrong. My decisions seem right at the time, but they always end up a big, fat mess. And now I've fucked up again. I should never have come here."

"How can you say that? Without you, Slightly and the Twins would be dead."

"Would they?" Peter shrugged. "If Tink had come back alone, her fairy dust would have pulled Slightly up from the lightning sand. If the twins hadn't seen me, they'd never have run. With Tink's dust, they'd have flown too and saved Emma."

_He has a point._ "Why did you come?"

Peter rubbed his unshaven chin. "Tink said, well, Tink lied that all was forgiven, that Emma still loved me."

"Once upon a time, a fairy lied to me too—Reul Gorm, in fact. If you know about the Storybrooke curse, then you know that when Emma was a baby, Prince Charming and I sent her to earth through a magic wardrobe. If we'd known it had enough magic to transport two, I could have come with her. If Geppetto had insisted Pinocchio have the second spot anyway, at least we could have given him instructions for her."

Peter sighed. "Pinocchio. That's August, right? From what Emma said yesterday, I think he lied to me. About a lot of things. Looking back, I don't know why I believed him or Reul Gorm."

"Well, it was true that Emma was the savior. Her love for Henry broke the curse."

"But would she have loved him less if we'd raised him as a family? I'm not much, but I would have tried my best. Instead of just talking to me, Reul Gorm could have talked to both of us. Then we both would have learned we had good reason to help Storybrooke when the time came. Emma had you and Charming. I had my papa."

Snow White raised her eyebrows. "Your father is in Storybrooke?"

"Reul Gorm told me I had to make a sacrifice to help him, and I agreed. He'd sacrificed so much for me. He's the most caring, humble, selfless man I've ever known."
Who can that be? "If he’s in Storybrooke, then both of you must be from here. That's not in Mr. Barrie's story, either."

Peter winced. "I've abandoned people who needed me in three different universes. First my papa here. Then my crew from Neverland. Then Emma and our son on earth."

Snow patted his hand. She'd never seen anyone so forlorn in all her life. "Well, the Lost Boys are glad you're back."

"That makes it even worse." Peter shuddered. "Everyone's counting on me. And I'm going to let them down. I can't fly anymore. I'm useless."

Snow sucked in her breath. And if Peter couldn't fly a mission with the Lost Boys to find their friends, then he couldn't fly Emma and her back to Storybrooke. Without happy thoughts, Peter Pan was stuck here, just like they were.

Finally. Smee slid low on the bench front seat of the hot-wired Pontiac Streamliner just far enough so he could still observe the Dark One over the dashboard. He'd been waiting for him to step outside his pawn shop since morning. Now that it was five p.m., he was starving. With any luck, he could run him over in time to catch the tail end of happy hour at the Three Billy Goats.

Thinking of the beer he'd soon be guzzling sent Smee's thoughts back to the Frontlands tavern where he'd first seen the Dark One. He doubted whatever was inside that damn biscuit tin would do for him what the scaly-skinned wizard had promised—spin the clock back till you're a little boy again. At this point, he'd be happy if it agreed to leave him the hell alone.

Smee pulled down the face-covering part of the navy-blue ski mask he'd nicked for the job. Then he twisted the screwdriver in the ignition and revved the engine. The time it would take the Dark One to lock his door and totter to the intersection should warm up the old motor. This deed required speed.

An hour after sunset, August pulled his motorcycle up to the curb around the corner from the pawnshop entrance, stomped on the kickstand, and cut the engine. The side street was unlit, but the lamps lining the main drag were bright. As he unbuckled his helmet, Mr. Gold came into view, limping past the front of his shop toward the intersection.

Perfect timing. August hopped off his motorcycle. "Hello! Can I ask you something? It'll only take a second."

Mr. Gold stopped and pivoted on his cane. "Pinocchio? Or is it August when you're on your bike?"

Swinging his helmet, he strode toward the older man. "It's August when I'm leaving town on my bike. That's what I want to ask you about. I'm still immune to the Storybrooke curse, aren't I? If I travel to the other side of the globe, I'll still remember my roots? That my father carved me from wood, that I used to have strings, that I came from the Enchanted Forest?"

"I see no reason to believe the magical perimeters have changed. Why are you asking?"

When he reached Mr. Gold, August put on his most engaging smile. "So you can call my Dad and put his mind at ease. I've lined up some trade journal articles to pay my way to Singapore. I don't want him worrying, but I don't want to miss this opportunity to—"

"—see something beyond this dreary little town? Who can blame you?" Mr. Gold's voice dripped with sarcasm. "What's it been… two days since you and Geppetto could talk together as father and
son, catch up on twenty-nine years of separation? I'm sure that's been more than enough time to say all that needed to be said."

August frowned. A *guilt trip isn't what I was planning on taking*. He shifted his weight, remembering the Blue Fairy's visit the night before. Her style had been more direct than Mr. Gold's, but she'd laid on her reproaches just as thickly. And that gave him an idea: play one against the other.

August let his shoulders sag and his face look sad. Sometimes even the truth required the proper presentation. "What Reul Gorm told Dad is that if I leave, he'll never see me again—that now I don't have strings my trade will be eating, drinking, sleeping, playing, and wandering around from morning till night."

At the fairy's name, Mr. Gold's eyelids had lowered. In a moment, their rivalry would get August what he'd asked for.

Instead, he heard Mr. Gold sigh. "And Geppetto… he's sorry I ever came to his house."

Surprised at hearing resignation in Mr. Gold's voice, August dropped his act. "No, no. The opposite. He told her, 'My boy's a young man. Wandering should be his trade.'"

Mr. Gold looked up.

August leaned forward. "Dad's proud I'm published—even if it's just a couple of paperback thrillers. That's the truth. And he likes my idea for a Singapore mystery. He just needs reassurance I'll remember I have a father to visit after I'm done exploring." He cocked his head to one side. "He'd appreciate a call."

Mr. Gold blinked.

*Once for yes?* August grinned. "Dad knows Reul Gorm has an agenda when it comes to me. He trusts you to give him a straight answer."

"Fine." Mr. Gold turned away, but not before August caught him smiling. "I have an important errand at the diner. I'll ring Geppetto after."

"Thanks."

Mr. Gold raised a hand as both an acknowledgement and a farewell and continued hobbling to the intersection.

*He's not such a bad guy.* August settled his helmet back on his head. To be fair, he should tell Mr. Gold who really drew the dagger picture.

Hearing the rumble of an older model car, August peered down the main street and saw a massive 1950's station wagon with a huge chrome grille like a toothy grin. Its white paint gleamed under the streetlamps. He had just enough time for an admiring smile before his jaw dropped.

The car hadn't stopped for the red light. It was squealing into a sharp turn—straight at Mr. Gold.

August started running toward him.

*Too late.* The monstrous whale of a car struck him full on. August froze, horrified, as Mr. Gold tumbled up the hood, bashed into the windshield, sailed into the air, and rolled off the back. He smacked the pavement, limbs askew like a marionette. August raced to help him.
The driver didn't even slow down.

Again Belle surveyed the hideout Acting Sheriff David had chosen. The backroom of the library that housed the fiction stacks was conveniently windowless. She and Ruby could keep the lights on from moon rise to moon set yet not risk being seen by King George's vigilantes. After rumors had spread through town that Billy the Mouse's death looked like a wolf attack, the deposed monarch had rallied dozens of malcontents eager to prove how tough they were.

Ruby's problem now wasn't the mob; it was her own self-doubts. Those who knew her best were positive that, wolf or no, she would never have killed Billy; Ruby had confessed she wasn't so sure.

Before today, Belle had never known her friend to be anything but perky and confident. To see her brunette hair tangled rather than artfully tousled was disturbing. She hadn't even changed from the Bohemian red and black patchwork dress she'd worn the day before.

Poor Ruby. Belle mustered her most reassuring voice. "No matter what you might've done in your past, David sees the good in you and that tells me one thing."

"What?" Ruby asked.

"That it's in there." Belle glanced at the manacle her friend was about to put on. Even though its purpose was to give Ruby peace of mind that her wolf self wouldn't tear up the library, the sight made Belle wince. Devices like that still haunted her nightmares. I can't let her be locked up by herself. "So if we can all see it, why can't you?"

"You really think so?" Ruby asked.

That you're a good person? Of course! Belle stepped closer, ready to give Ruby a hug. "Trust me. I'm sort of an expert when it comes to rehabilitation." As she spoke, she could see the anxiety leave Ruby's dark brown eyes.

"Maybe—maybe, you're right."

At her friend's words, Belle smiled. She was getting through. Then, without warning, she felt the familiar chill of iron being clamped around her wrist. Aghast, she looked down—wanting to deny what her eyes saw. I'm a free woman. That can't be a chain. A nauseating dread welled up inside her. She tried to concentrate on what Ruby was saying, but the words were muffled—like the comings and goings of faceless people beyond a cell door.

"No, no, no..." Belle murmured as Ruby walked away, "what... what are you doing?" Leaving me chained to a wall... alone...

Ruby paused in the doorway. "I can't let you stop me. The mob wants a wolf. I'm going to give them one. I need to pay for all I've done."

The mob? The term shocked Belle back to the present. "They'll kill you!"

Ruby's eyes were calm and determined. "Isn't that what I deserve?"

Ruby dashed around the corner and out of sight. In a moment, Belle heard the library's front door open and slam.

David had told her to call him if the mob came their way. Now Ruby was going to the mob.
Why didn’t I keep my cell phone on me! Instead, the magical gadget that Granny had picked out for her and young Henry had patiently demonstrated sat in her coat pocket atop the checkout desk—far beyond the reach of her chain.

I’ve failed everyone.

Her manacle clanked. Belle cringed. The chain felt impossibly heavy, and it dragged her down. Sinking to the floor, she clasped her free arm around her knees and began rocking. The shackled arm she dangled as if it weren't a part of her.

I'm just a privileged rich girl—sheltered, incompetent, clueless. And no matter how earnestly she tried to deny it by working, reading, and playing at solving everyone else's problems, that didn't change. Had she really told Ruby I'm sort of an expert when it comes to rehabilitation? Hah. Just another example of figuring if she said the optimistic thing, a bright outcome would follow. Whom was she fooling? She couldn't even rehabilitate herself.

Belle's lips and fingertips tingled, and she realized her breathing was too fast, too shallow. She forced herself to recall the advice for managing panic attacks she'd culled from psychology books on torture and false imprisonment—count to five for each inhalation and exhalation and orient herself to her surroundings.

But when Belle glanced up, she recognized for the first time that the height of the library ceiling was the same as her cell in the Evil Queen's palace. Steel shelves surrounded her, reminding her of the iron plates riveted to the tower walls.

Belle moaned. The queen’s hateful voice reverberated in her mind, gloating over plans to destroy Rumplestiltskin. Then as now, the thing she had to do, she couldn't do—warn and help. She was worse than useless. She was a thing controlled by others' whims. A pawn.

Chapter End Notes

When the episode aired, I saw a lot of on-line discussion of what it would be like for Belle to get chained up all over again. I hope this chapter captured that.
All the Help You Can Get

Chapter Summary

Smee hits Mr. Gold with something bigger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All the Help You Can Get

Emma: I don't need anything (Desperate Souls).

Mr. Gold lay on the pavement, dazed from his impromptu flight. If he could just sit up, he'd be able to clear his head. But as soon as he raised himself, just a little, Pinocchio was crouching by his side, pushing him back down while speaking urgently into his cell phone.

Mr. Gold saw concern in Pinocchio's pale blue eyes as he ended his call, jammed his cell in his leather jacket and leaned forward. "Don't move. Not till the EMT's check you out. If you have a spinal injury, you're risking paralysis."

Mr. Gold grimaced. Already, he could hear sirens. "No ambulance. I don't have a good relationship with the medical establishment. I'd rather die than have Dr. Whale hear I need science."

"I also called the sheriff," Pinocchio added. "I think you were struck intentionally."

"Charming will say I had it coming." He stretched his good leg out and reached down to straighten his lame one. Nothing broken. Again, he began propping himself up. When Pinocchio reached over to press him flat again, Mr. Gold scowled. "Don't make me zap you."

Pinocchio smiled faintly and leaned back on his haunches. "So, do you have a good relationship with anybody?"

Mr. Gold narrowed his eyes. Being slammed by a car was enough aggravation for one day. Sitting at last, he assessed his situation. Not only was a second suit ruined, but his raincoat as well. And worse, half of his cane lay splintered nearby while the half with the brass head lay on the other side of the brightly lit intersection. Soon one of the gawkers would snatch it as a trophy. No matter. The only essential was Ruby's enchanted scarf. Seeing the black-and-silver twill several yards away, he pointed to it. "Please. Could you retrieve that for me?"

Pinocchio jumped to his feet and strode over to it. He held it up with a quizzical look, apparently wondering why Mr. Gold had such a feminine accessory.

"Not mine," he said hastily. "Ruby's. I'm returning it to her."

Pinocchio's sudden grin said, Oh, you lucky dog.

Mr. Gold rolled his eyes. Did Pinocchio think the young lady had forgotten it after a night of passion? Ridiculous.
Mr. Gold was almost glad when the ambulance pulled in between them—until a plump old woman and a frizzy-haired youth began dragging a stretcher out the back. Off the ambulance, its wheels dropped and the EMTs rolled it forward. In a moment, they lowered the contraption beside him.

"I don't need that. If I could just get some assistance standing—"

"Hold your horses," said the uniformed woman. "We'll examine your legs shortly. First, let me check your pulse."

Mr. Gold pushed her hand away. "Don't you know who I am?"

When the gray-haired woman folded her arms, something about her glare looked familiar. "Of course I do, but it's my job to help anyone who's injured—regardless of my personal feelings."

Mr. Gold studied her a moment. "I thought I recognized you.

This is the old woman who used to live in a giant's boot. She's not plump. She's pregnant. "You're angry with me, dear, but don't forget: you're the one who asked for a fertility potion. Which child is this? Seventeen? It's not my fault you haven't checked out this world's many forms of birth control."

"Ha, ha. You should know none of them work for me."

"Indeed?" Mr. Gold felt a moment of pride.

The old woman glowered at him. "The only method that does work, well, my husband says he'd rather starve."

Walking up behind the EMT, Pinocchio snickered. She harrumphed and grabbed Mr. Gold's wrist again. When she leaned forward to shine a flashlight in his eyes, he opened them wide.

"See? Not in shock. What I'd meant was that if you know I'm Mr. Gold, then you know I always need assistance standing. I'm unharmed by the accident—not even bleeding. I was thrown clear. But my cane is broken. If you have something I can borrow—a crutch—I'll be on my way."

The EMT clicked off her flashlight. "We have crutches, sure. They're for people who suffer injuries in an accident and need to be seen in the emergency room. But you're unharmed, so..." She shrugged.

"No crutch for me. Naturally. What was I thinking?" At his back Mr. Gold could hear the police car screeching to a stop. The siren's whine ended abruptly, but the red light continued flashing around the intersection. To his chagrin, he noticed the spectators had edged closer. This circus must end.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Charming striding toward him. "Acting Sheriff, if you could just tell this kind woman—"

"What's this about a car running you down?" Charming stopped, towering over Mr. Gold. "You look fine."

"I am. I was thrown clear. I just need a—"

"He can't walk." The creases fanning from the corners of the old woman's eyes gave her a look of malicious satisfaction.

Mr. Gold blew out his breath. "Well, of course I can't, dearie, but if you'll please lend me a crutch, that child you're carrying shall forever be known as the baby of the family."
He watched her catch his meaning and her spite turn to joy. Springing to her feet, she said, "I'll go find one now." She scurried to the ambulance, her gray ponytail bouncing.

"But Myrtle, you said they're for people who suffered injuries," her skinny partner called after her.

"I write your evaluations, mister. Come help me look."

Finally. Mr. Gold glanced up at Pinocchio. "Could you give me a boost?"

Pinocchio nodded, reached under his armpits, and yanked him to his feet.

*Undignified, but better than squatting on the pavement.* Holding the younger man's shoulder with one hand, Mr. Gold brushed off his clothing with his other. One sleeve of his black Burberry raincoat was abraded down to the lining, and his dark brown pants were torn and stained with oil. With a sigh, he lifted his gaze to see Charming frown.

"Why do you need a crutch? You mended Dr. Whale's arm. Can't you mend two cracked pieces of wood?"

*If I could mend my cane, dearie, I'd mend my damn leg.* Mr. Gold was considering various derisive responses when Pinocchio butted in.

"If the cane belonged to you or me, he could, but when—"

Mr. Gold cut him off. "I don't have time for explanations. Suffice it to say *magic works differently here.*"

"You still need to provide a statement on the hit-and-run," Charming said. "I know why I'm in a hurry to go. Why are you?"

"He's returning Ruby's scarf." Nudging Mr. Gold and winking, Pinocchio handed over the length of fringed, checkered cloth. "But if I were him, I'd go home and change first. I think Ruby's the sort of girl who appreciates—"

"August has it wrong," Mr. Gold broke in, though the look of surprise and reevaluation on Charming's face had been rather gratifying. "Ruby lent me her scarf, so I could place a spell on it. To be on the safe side, I cast three."

"Oh, that's why you have it." Charming looked relieved.

*As if I couldn't get Ruby if I wanted her.* Before Mr. Gold could retort to Charming, the EMTs returned. The skinny one thrust out a crutch. Letting go of Pinocchio, Mr. Gold slipped it under his arm. He took a couple of steps, swung around, and hobbled back to smile at the older EMT. "Come by my shop at five the evening after tomorrow. I'll have the anti-potion ready. You can collect this crutch then, too. Do we have a deal?"

"Deal," she agreed and clapped her hands together. Humming, she strolled back to the ambulance, trailed by her co-worker.

Charming stared at them, then Pinocchio. "What I have to say to Mr. Gold is kind of private."

"It's about Ruby. And her scarf. Apparently... she needs magic." Pinocchio glanced from Mr. Gold to Charming. "So the stories are true? She does turn into a wolf? And last night she killed—"

"No. She didn't. I'm positive."
Mr. Gold knew Charming’s statement was nothing but a bold assertion. If he had proof, he’d have said. But he could see that Pinocchio looked reassured.

"Back in the Enchanted Forest, she was a rebel fighter," Charming continued. "She played a big role in defeating King George. He’s stirred up a bunch of his old soldiers who want payback. They’d have no regrets shooting a wolf, but if that scarf can keep her human, they wouldn’t dare."

Pinocchio rubbed his chin. "You’ve stowed her somewhere for her own protection... the city jail?"

"You guessed it." Charming widened his blue eyes so innocently that Mr. Gold suspected he was lying. "Just keep it to yourself."

Pinocchio took a step forward. "I want to help. If a mob shows up, you'll need more warm bodies on your side."

Charming shifted his weight. Then he folded his arms. "All right. You've convinced me. Meet us outside the jail. But hurry."

Pinocchio grinned. "No problem." He tightened the strap on his helmet and jogged to his bike.

When Pinocchio was out of earshot, Mr. Gold glanced sidelong at Charming. "So... Ruby is not in the jail."

Charming nodded then jerked his head toward his cruiser and started walking.

Mr. Gold had to swing the crutch quickly to keep up. "Frankly, August could be trusted with a pretty young woman's secret." *After all, I'm trusting him with a dangerous secret about me.* The only other person besides his son to ever see the Dark One's dagger hadn't been, so lucky.

"No sense taking chances," Charming replied. "Ruby's chaining herself to a sturdy pipe in the library. I'll drop you there. Then Granny's going to help me do a little investigating."

* * * * *

Neal had to admit, his crew had done well without him. In Neverland, a variety of fruit-bearing plants and obligingly slow-moving beasts had kept everyone well-fed. The Fire Swamp wasn't, so hospitable, but that hadn't daunted his guys. With boyish experimentation, they'd discovered that cattails were edible, that snares could catch marsh rabbits, and that the pumpkin seeds Tink had flown back from earth grew just about anywhere. The huts his men had built weren't as cozy as their underground hideout had been, but what could one expect in three weeks? At least, no one had disappeared.

Where had Hook's pirates hidden the boys they'd kidnapped in Neverland? To figure that out, Neal needed thoughts happy enough to send him aloft to do some spying.

On the other side of the campfire, Emma was playing twenty questions with half a dozen of his mates. Gazing at her, Neal reminded himself that happiness with her was gone forever. From the time she’d crawled out of her blankets until now, she'd been a whirlwind of friendliness and usefulness—but not once had she glanced his way.

At this moment, the important thing was to figure out how to get his never-again true love back to their son. To do so, he needed to pay attention to what her mother was asking him.

"What about the Lost Boys? They flew us here from the Backlands Mountains. Storybrooke is probably farther but couldn't they manage it? Perhaps in shifts?"
"They could do that distance easy," Neal replied, "if only they could fly to earth at all."

In the flickering firelight, Neal saw Snow White frown. "But I thought they all came from earth."

"Yes. And the thought of returning upsets them. The twins' family died from the plague... Nibs' father beat his mother to death... Freebird's parents were killed by bloodhounds in Mississippi... The rest have stories just as bad or worse."

Pressing her fingers to her throat, Snow murmured, "Oh. I had no idea."

"My first experience with earth was unhappy too. If it hadn't been, Tink wouldn't have whisked me to Neverland."

Snow curled her fingers under her chin. "When was that?"

"Mid-seventeen-hundreds." When Snow's eyes widened, Neal returned a crooked smile. "In Neverland one never ages. Barrie got that part right."

She nodded.

"It turned out my given name—Baelfire—was scary by earth standards. Bael is the name of a demon and fire sounds like hell. When I fell through a portal right into the middle of a little country funeral, everyone freaked. For three days the vicar protected me. Then some milkmaid found a toad in her butter churn. The next thing I knew, I was running from a mob. They caught me hiding in a goat shed and set fire to it. Tink snatched me up through the roof just in time."

"Goodness. How did you manage to fall through a portal in the first place?"

Neal sighed and shook his head. "My papa was under a curse. It did horrible things to him. I asked Reul Gorm for a way out. She recommended leaving the Enchanted Forest for a world without magic. There a curse would have no effect. That solution seemed pretty extreme, but I thought, go for it. I stupidly assumed Papa agreed with me. I should have talked it out with him. That's the least I could have done. After all, Papa had taken on the curse for my sake—to save me from the Ogre Wars."

"The Frontlands Massacres?"

"So that's what the history books called them." Neal chuckled softly. "I was fourteen with visions of going into battle and saving the day. Instead, my papa did. He ended the war."

Neal heard Snow inhale sharply. Suddenly, she looked ill.

He leaned forward. "Are you okay? Slightly needs to boil his rabbit stew a little longer."

"Yes, yes," she said quickly. "Let me get this straight. Your father—my grandson's grandfather—he's the one who secured the ogre truce?"

"Yes." Smiling, Neal sat up straighter. If Henry found his father lacking in admirable qualities, at least he could be proud of his grandfather. "Eighteenth century England found my name strange. I can't imagine what they'd have made of Papa's. I bet even you can't guess it."

Snow cleared her throat. In a raspy voice, she answered, "Rumplestiltskin."

Chapter End Notes
In this story, who knows whose identities and family connections when differs from canon, but hopefully in a fun way.
Find a Way

Chapter Summary

Rumple finds Belle chained up in the library (yes, *that* scene).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Find a Way

**Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold):** I will do nothing else, I will love nothing else. *(The Return)*

Stepping into the library, Mr. Gold pointed back at the door, using magic to shut it and lock it—something he was still unable to do for his own house and shop. The main room was dark, but the hallway beyond was lit. Faintly, he caught the sound of whimpering. His forehead wrinkled. *Poor Ruby.* The moon would rise soon. Evidently, she was dreading its effects.

“Ruby, dear, this is Mr. Gold,” he called out as he limped across the floor. “I've cast three different spells on your scarf. One of them should do the trick.”

Then he heard a sob that was definitely not Ruby. He tensed. The sound was like his own darling Belle wracked by night terrors, unable to fight her way out of sleep. He swung the crutch out further, leaning into it, quickening his pace.

“Belle! I'm here.”

The crutch thumped rhythmically on the linoleum floor as Mr. Gold rounded the corner and hurried down the hall. When he reached the fiction room and saw Belle slumped on the floor with one hand chained to the wall, his face crumpled. He jerked his wrist with such force that his power snapped the manacle in two and whipped it across the room to clang against a steel shelf.

“Oh, Belle.” He threw down the crutch, dropped the scarf, hopped four steps, then collapsed beside her, enfolding her in his arms and nestling her against his shoulder. His mind cried *I'll protect you,* but he knew those words wouldn't help. Instead, he whispered, “You're free, you're free.”

A tremor ran through her. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing close, molding herself to his body. His pulse raced, and he closed his eyes. *We fit together perfectly*—as they had when she'd tumbled off the ladder into his arms, when she'd escaped the lockup ward to find him in his shop, and every night of the bittersweet interval when she'd shared his bed. The memories flooded his mind, melting into a vision of Belle and him like two strands of true love entwining in a sparkling magical dance, tantalizing him with promises of exquisite joy.

He shuddered. *Lies. All lies.* The thought of them together was absurd. She was well rid of him. For her sanity and well-being, she had to remain so. But he would protect her—always, in any possible way he could.

Belle stirred inside his arms, and he inhaled deeply. He'd thought their embrace in the mines had been their last. Now he'd been granted another last time.
Sighing, Mr. Gold committed every detail to memory. Then he steeled himself to pull back and touch her chin. When she raised her head, her gaze was dreamy, sending a delicate shiver down his spine. He forced himself to ignore it.

“Who did this to you?” he asked. “Who chained you up?”

Belle blinked. Then her lips parted. “Oh, Rumple. Ruby is throwing herself on the mercy of the mob. She didn't want me stopping her. She didn't… didn't know I… didn't know I…” Her words trailed off in gasping breaths.

As Mr. Gold stroked Belle's hair, an image of Ruby as a snail popped into his head. Hastily, he banished it, reminding himself what a sweet young thing she was. “She didn't know you'd been locked up before.” Including, by me.

“We—we have to help her,” Belle said.

“That's why I came. I enchanted her scarf to control her transformation. But if I have to spend time looking for her—” From outside the library, came a distinctive lonesome howl. He sucked air through his teeth. Then slowly, he shook his head. “Too late.”

Belle bit her lip. “But the scarf will work after she's a wolf, won't it? Change her back? If I could get close enough…”

“No.” Mr. Gold stared into Belle's blue eyes still puffy from crying. “It's too dangerous.”

She swallowed hard. “But not—not if you're there.”

Mr. Gold recalled her confession from, so many years before. I always wanted to be brave. I figured do the brave thing and bravery would follow. Right now her gaze was anxious, and her chin was trembling. Every instinct rebelled against the thought of risking the slightest harm to his sweet, matchless Belle. But he knew the soul-numbing, mind-corroding effects of not standing up to one's fears.

“You trust me?” he asked.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded.

“I think I can stop the wolf from hurting us without hurting the wolf. But we must stick together.” As he spoke, Mr. Gold saw the light returning to her eyes. He sat up straighter. “All right, then. If you could fetch me that crutch and the scarf…” He pointed.

Belle sprang up to do as he'd asked. She scooped them up and faced him again. Then she frowned. “Rumple… what happened to your clothes?”

Mr. Gold felt his cheeks warming. He'd never let Belle see him unkempt before. “A car bumped me. I'm fine. My cane and suit…”

Before he could finish, she was crouching by his side, one hand resting on his back while the other cupped his cheek. “Why didn't you tell me?”

For a moment, he couldn't speak. Doesn't she know her touch makes me weak? Then he forced a nonchalant smile to his face. “It was nothing. Not a scratch on me. I was… thrown clear.”

Trying to keep his hand steady, Mr. Gold reached for the crutch. Instead Belle slipped her arm under his, bent her back, and began to stand—as if a beautiful young woman propping up a disreputable
cripple were the most natural thing in the world.

When they were both upright, she offered him the scarf and then the crutch. “This is, so not you. No panache, no—”

From outside, Mr. Gold caught the noise of angry people approaching the library. He pressed his index finger to his lips. Belle squeezed his arm, telling him she'd heard it too. They froze, waiting. Then the wolf howled again. He could make out King George's voice, but the words were too muffled to understand.

Cantankerous old tyrant, Mr. Gold thought. He'd never liked him. No matter how good the deal, he'd always demanded something more.

Belle whispered, “Back door?”

Mr. Gold bundled up Ruby's scarf under his arm. “Lead the way.” I hope the mob doesn't reach her first.

As soon as Snow said Rumplestiltskin, she wished she hadn't. But she couldn't un-ring the bell.

In quick succession, Baelfire-Peter-Neal looked surprised, impressed, puzzled, and worried. Finally he said, “Your realm was way on the other side of the Enchanted Forest. Over the years, did Papa really become that… famous?”

Snow smiled brightly. If she could just stick to the truth while avoiding the awful truth, then maybe she could avoid grounding Peter Pan for life. “Rumplestiltskin was legendary for the ogre truces. He didn't just negotiate one for the Frontlands. He negotiated truces with all the ogre tribes in the Enchanted Forest—including the ones in my neck of the woods.”

Peter released his breath slowly. “That's the kind of thing Papa dreamed of doing—turning the curse's power toward good.”

Snow wrinkled her brow. Really? She hadn't even suspected before that Rumplestiltskin was originally a man. That his magic had stemmed from a curse was news too. But that he'd wanted to use his power for good was the biggest surprise of all.

Shaking his head, Peter smiled. “I know there's a Brothers Grimm fairytale called ‘Rumplestiltskin.’ The only thing they got right is his spinning wheel.”

And enticing people into unsavory deals. And always exacting a price. And a penchant for calculating his price in babies. To Peter she said, “What do you expect?”

Snow craned her neck to observe her daughter on the far side of the campfire. Nibs, Freebird, Rock, Curly, Slightly and the cherub were vying for her attention, and she was delighting them all—a pat here, a word there, and an appreciative laugh all around. Emma's a natural born mother. What would she think of Mr. Gold as grandfather to Henry? And what would she say about him to Peter Pan?

Curly's still not grasping twenty-one questions. Emma gave the Lost Boy a playful punch on the arm. “Come on, kid. How can you answer yes the object you're thinking of is a vegetable after answering yes it's an animal?”

Freebird started bouncing up and down, making the log Emma shared with him wobble. “I know, I
know! Banana fish!”

Emma was about to make a goofy cross-eyed face in honor of the silly answer. Then she saw Curly smack his own forehead. “I made it too easy.”

“Mmm, banana fish.” Rock patted his stomach, his eyes wistful. “I wish we had some right now.”

Emma started laughing. “Oh, banana fish is a real thing? Neverland, right?”

“Neverland has everything!” Nibs gave her a hug. “Wait ’til you see it. Now that Peter's here…”

Emma hugged Nibs back before he could start gushing on about his favorite subject. Then she peered over his shoulder to observe her mother and Neal on the far side of the campfire. In the wavering light, she could see them huddling, intent on catching each other's words. What're they doing? Exchanging life stories?

“I'm the very best at roasting banana fish,” Slightly announced. “I remember how Mummy used to do it.”

Oh, no. Not again. Somehow, no orderly activity could stand up to one of Slightly's ridiculous boasts. Emma suspected he made them because he enjoyed the free-for-alls they started.

Fingers arched and primed for tickling, the cherub launched himself at the larger boy. The two grappled in the ashy dirt beside the campfire, gasping and giggling. Nibs slid off Emma's lap to join the fray. Curly, Rock, and Freebird piled on.

Slanting her legs outside the line of scrimmage, Emma stole another glance at Neal. How many years had he lived this strange, adult-less life before opting to grow up on earth? If he had tried to describe this to her, she'd have thought him crazy. Yet this absurd fact—my boyfriend was Peter Pan—explained his odd mixture of wisdom and naiveté. With innumerable years of leading troops in Neverland but only a scant five years of experience with twentieth century earth, no wonder he'd supported himself jacking cars and shoplifting. His excuse for a life of crime had been better than hers.

Emma raised her chin. But that doesn't excuse Neal running out on me. Even the smallest child knows that's wrong.

Then above the noise of the wrestling boys, crackling fire, and ever-present swamp creature croaks, whistles, and hoots, Emma heard a sob. She sprang to her feet. Glancing across the campfire, she saw her mother and Neal jump up, too.

Poor Aurora. Emma headed away from the campfire toward the lean-tos nestled against the rocks. Mulan would reach her first, but sometimes it took all three of the princess's traveling companions to yank her back to the land of the awake. Mary-Margaret had tried to explain the strange netherworld of sleeping curses to her. Though Emma couldn't quite picture it, she understood it was more terrifying than the worst nightmare one had ever had.

Aurora whimpered louder. Emma strode faster.

Soon her mother was next to her. “This sounds like a bad one.”

Neal came up on Mary-Margaret's other side, carrying one of the Lost Boys' cattail-dipped-in-rabbit-fat torches. At least he knows enough not to try to walk beside me.

From Aurora's lean-to, she heard Mulan's commanding “Wake up!” and a loud slap. Sometimes that
was the only thing that worked.

Then she heard Aurora murmuring, “Stop... Let me sleep... I need to hear... he's saying something...”

Stooping down, Emma wiggled into the lean-to. Her mother wedged herself by Mulan on the other side. Neal stopped in the entrance. By the glow of the burning cattail, Emma could see that the princess looked exasperated.

“The boy I told you about? On the other side of the flames? Tonight he wore a magical talisman that held back the fire. We were just about to introduce ourselves, when I was rudely awakened. At the last instant, he called out Henry.”

*Henry? No.* “My son was under a sleeping curse for less than a day. He can't be in that horrible place.” She clasped the magic compass dangling between her breasts. Every time she’d looked at it, the enchanted arrow had pointed to Storybrooke, following her heart to Henry. If the arrow now marked the sleeping curse netherworld, that would prove Henry was there, too.

Emma shuddered, afraid to look. Glancing at Neal, she saw distress lining his forehead.

Her mother's reaction was shockingly different. “Emma! If that's our Henry and Aurora and he can talk, they can relay messages. It would be like calling home!”

The princess yawned. “Let me fall back to sleep, so I can find out.”

---

Belle's mind raced as she and Rumple slipped out the backdoor of the library. Looking up into the black, starry night, she inhaled a lungful of salty sea air. The open sky was so exhilarating, it made her feel guilty. *We’re here to help Ruby.*

Pulling her coat collar closed against the chill, Belle peeked around the dumpster, then back at Rumple. He was holding his head to the side, listening. Being with him again seemed, so right, she felt a sweet ache in the pit of her stomach. When he pointed up the alley, she nodded. Faintly, she could hear the cries and shouts of King George's rabble-rousers.

Rumple began limping toward the side street, setting a good pace. Despite its inelegance, the crutch was definitely a more efficient support than his cane. Belle walked double-time to keep up.

At the end of the alley, they both peered around the side of the library. The mob sounded near, but it wasn't in sight. Then another wolf howl pierced the night, and Rumple tugged her sleeve.

“The confrontation may already be happening,” he said. “To get close enough to do Ruby any good, we need to be in front of the mob, but I doubt we'll manage it.”

“We have to try.”

Together, they hurried down the sidewalk toward the main street.

Without slowing down, Belle pulled out her cell. “If David's heard what we've heard, he'll know Ruby's not in the library. Maybe he’s found her.” She thumbed in her password, muddled it, then got it on the second try.

“Granny's with him,” Rumple said. “If King George's men won't recognize Prince Charming's authority, they'll certainly recognize hers.”

Belle gave a nervous laugh as she scrolled through her contacts. *That's funny 'cause it's true.*
“They're Ruby's best hope,” he finished.

Belle glanced at him sidelong. “Plus her enchanted scarf.” She saw Rumple slant his gaze away as he did when avoiding a compliment. “Hmm,” she murmured and pressed her phone to her ear. One ring and David's voicemail message started playing. Shaking her head, she said, “I'll try Granny—”

Her shoe caught a crack in the cement, and she stumbled. Her phone flew from her hand, skittering down the sidewalk. She made a dash for it, catching it just before it bounced into the gutter. By the time she looked up, Rumple had caught up with her and was pointing a couple of blocks down the main street.

Belle gasped. Two dozen vigilantes brandished torches and makeshift weapons at the gate to a storage lot. If Ruby was cornered, she'd have no route of escape.

“I can handle those bullies,” Rumple said softly. “But it will require me attacking them with magic.”

Belle noted one of the hooligans flaunting a pitchfork in the air. She stood up, coming shoulder to shoulder with Rumple. “To defend Ruby against them—absolutely. Just don't harm anyone.”

“Nothing permanent. I promise.” He raised his hand.

“Wait!” Ahead she saw a shadowy shape darting in and out of the unlit doorways of shops. “Is that—you?”

“Hey!” Rumple called out. “Show yourself.” He began hobbling forward.

Belle broke into a run, leaving Rumple behind. When her pounding feet had brought her within a few yards, the stranger jumped out—facing her just long enough for her to recognize him.

King George. She knew him both as a disagreeable guest at her father's castle and a grouchy patron at the diner. Now he was in flight. That could only mean one thing: he'd been deposed again.

Belle raised two fists in the air. “Yes!”

The old man's patrician features went rigid with hatred. Then he took off loping across the street.

Up the block, Belle saw David and Ruby—human Ruby draped in her old-world red riding hood—helping Granny to her feet. They exchanged some words. Then David and Ruby raced to a parked police cruiser, hopped in, and sped off.

Belle looked back over her shoulder. Rumple gestured to her to keep going. She hurried on.

When Granny saw her, the old lady broke into a grin. “A friendly face!”

Hugging her, Belle could feel the poor woman trembling. She'd been through a lot. Belle patted her back, soothing her. Then she felt Granny stiffen.

“What's he doing here?”

Belle pulled back. Turning, she saw Rumple leaning on the crutch a few feet away, Ruby's scarf still tucked under his arm. At Granny's words, his lips thinned while his eyes widened in challenge.

Granny strutted forward, hands on her hips. “Come to see the wolf run to ground?”

The corners of Rumple's mouth twitched. “You have it, dearie. That's exactly why I came.”
“Well, prepare to be disappointed.” Granny jutted her chin out as if she’d delivered a serious jab.

Belle saw Rumple lock eyes with Granny. Then he favored her with one of his teasing, flirtatious smiles. “Why? Did I miss all the fun?”

Belle grabbed Granny's arm before she could lunge. “Stop! Please! You don't understand. Rumple was here to help.”

“No matter.” Ignoring Granny, he limped forward and handed Belle the scarf. “Could you return this to your friend?”

Belle clutched it to her chest. “Oh, Rumple. If you would just explain—”

“Why did you have my Ruby's scarf?” Granny's tone remained belligerent.

“No particular reason.” The lines in Rumple's face seemed deeply etched. “She mistakenly left it in my shop.”

When Rumple turned his head to gaze at Belle, she saw his sardonic defenses melt. His smile grew gentle and his brown eyes took on the faraway look of final farewells. “You're brave in ways I've never been, my dear. Nothing anybody does will ever take that from you. I couldn't. Neither can anyone else.” He took a step back. “Goodbye, Belle.” Pivoting on the crutch, he limped away.

Belle called out, “Wait.”

Rumple lifted his free hand and fluttered his fingers. “Goodbye,” he repeated. He didn't even turn around.

Chapter End Notes

When "Child of the Moon" first aired, the lack of a scene showing Belle released from the library raised a lot of discussion. Hopefully, the version in this chapter meets expectations.
Chapter Summary

Acting Sheriff Charming investigates.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I'll Tell You Anything

Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold): Then there's one simple question for you to ponder. (The Doctor)

When August walked into the police station to give his statements the next morning, he saw Mr. Gold perched awkwardly on an uncomfortable-looking folding chair in the hallway beside the soda machine. His back was hunched, and his head was bowed. The cane he was restlessly passing from hand to hand was ebony like the one destroyed in the accident, but the wood was scratched, and the brass head was dinged. Apparently, it had seen a lot of action.

“At least you dug up a replacement for that silly crutch,” Pinocchio said.

Mr. Gold shrugged but didn't look up. “I retired this eight months ago. Luckily, I'm a hoarder.”

Pinocchio glanced at the sign on the door across the hall—104 Evidence. This is where he'd been asked to come, but the venetian blinds were slanted shut. Who else is Sheriff Nolan interviewing? How long do I have to wait? He needed to check his flight to Singapore.

Sighing, Pinocchio plopped down on the other metal chair and stretched out his legs. When Mr. Gold finally twisted his head to glance at him, his eyes widened. In response, Pinocchio cocked an eyebrow and lightly touched the swollen flesh over his cheekbone and the bump on his forehead.

Mr. Gold winced. “You really did defend the jail against the mob, didn't you?”

“Yes. Wish I'd known Ruby wasn't in it.”

Mr. Gold chuckled softly. “I'd have thought you of all people would have been able to spot a bald-faced deception like Charming's.”

Pinocchio rolled his eyes. I'm never going to live down the lying thing, am I? “Well, I'd have thought you of all people would know everyone believes what they want to believe.”

“Touché.” Mr. Gold raised one hand off his cane. “If you'd like, I can wave those cuts and bruises away…”

“After the sheriff snaps his photos, that'd be great. If I go to the airport looking like this, security will search my carry-ons for sure.”

“Or…” Mr. Gold tipped his head to one side. “Geppetto told me my music box is ready. If you drop it by my shop around one, that's when Ruby's bringing me fish and chips from the diner. She might be interested in how you singlehandedly delayed those hooligans long enough for Charming and
Granny to fetch her cloak.”

“Wow. That's even better.” *Fantastic, in fact.* His flight to Singapore wasn't for four days. Why let them go to waste? Now that King George had confessed to killing Billy, he had no reason not to hang out with the big bad wolf girl. Bemused, Pinocchio stared at Mr. Gold. “And thanks for calling Dad. I wouldn't have expected it after what you went through last night.”

Mr. Gold wrinkled his forehead. “On the contrary. After everything that happened, chatting with your father was a relief. He—”

The door to the evidence-slash-interrogation room opened. Pinocchio looked up to see Sheriff Nolan stepping back to let a short, pudgy man in a startlingly red knit cap bump his way past. Suddenly, the stranger froze, his eyes anxious. Glancing sidelong, Pinocchio saw an expression of grim recognition on Mr. Gold's face.

“Good morning, Mr. Smee.” Mr. Gold's voice was soft, but his tone was menacing.

*Mr. Smee? The pirate?* Switching his gaze back, Pinocchio saw the nervous little man's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. Then he scooted down the hallway.

As soon as the street door slammed, Pinocchio gave a low whistle. “What's he doing here? Shouldn't Smee be in Neverland losing duels to Lost Boys?” He couldn't wait to text Neal. Where was that old so-and-so, anyway? Maybe the chance to confront one of Hook's crew would finally get him to Storybrooke.

“Before Neverland, Mr. Smee lived in the Enchanted Forest.” Planting his cane in front of him, Mr. Gold pushed himself to his feet. Automatically, Pinocchio reached out to steady him, and the wizard shot him a crooked smile. Then he trained his eyes on the sheriff. “But this concerns more recent history.”

“It's not what you think,” Sheriff Nolan said quickly. “Smee came in as a concerned citizen. He witnessed the accident.”

“Did he, now.” Mr. Gold leaned on his cane.

Pinocchio heard mockery in Mr. Gold's tone. He saw Sheriff Nolan glare at him, then smile. “I'm taking August's statement first. Kindly wait your turn.”

Feeling awkward, Pinocchio muttered, “He's been here longer.”

“No matter,” Mr. Gold said, slowly lowering himself to the chair. “I have a call to make.”

Emma placed her boots on the flattest of the rocks ringing the spring-fed pond Mary-Margaret had chosen for bathing. Carefully, she wrapped the enchanted compass in her socks and secured the bundle inside the toe. Craning her neck, she checked over the top of the ferns for underage voyeurs.

*All clear.*

She slipped her black tank top and chinos off but decided to keep her underwear. Mulan and Aurora were foot patrolling, but what if the Lost Boys' curiosity sent them aloft? If she had become a mom figure as she suspected, she didn't want them traumatized.

Quickly, Emma stepped into the chilly water and crouched down to her armpits. Her mother slid in naked beside her and handed her a grayish-green cube.
“Soap,” Mary-Margaret said. “Peter, uh, Neal made it this morning from rabbit fat, pumpkin seeds, campfire ash, and pine needles.”

*That doesn't sound very clean.* Emma gave it a sniff. “Smells okay.” She ran the bar up and down her damp arms. The smooth texture felt luxurious on her skin. “Neal made this?”

“Back on earth, he found the recipe on the Internet. The pine makes it disinfectant, and the pumpkin seed oil helps it lather. He forwarded the instructions via Tinker Bell a week ago but no one had tried making it yet.”

Emma smiled and stretched a leg out of the water. “Boys.”

Mary-Margaret nodded, spreading soap bubbles across her face. “Neal's been looking out for them the best he could.”

“Long distance?” Emma frowned at her cracked and dirty toenails.

“That was the only way available to him. Neal told me that like most grownups, he couldn't form a happy thought without diluting it with doubts and regrets. Without pure joy, one can't fly.”

Emma rinsed off her foot and inspected it. **“Better.”**

“How come he could fly two evenings ago?”

“Tinker Bell told him you were here. And she told him about his son.” Mary-Margaret paused. “His happy thoughts were you and Henry.”

“Oh, really?” Emma dunked her mother's head under water.

Mary-Margaret burst the surface, spluttering. She took a swipe at her daughter. Emma tried to snatch her wrist but toppled backwards. The cold, soapy water closed over her face. Rolling over, she arched her head out of the pond.

“Look!” Mary-Margaret said. “The soap floats.”

Emma grabbed for the bobbing bar, needing two tries to catch it. “I know what you're going to say. If Neal is happy, he can fly us home. But I'm not the one to help him. He had his chance.”

“What about Henry? Doesn't he deserve to know his father?”

Emma took a deep breath and immersed herself. *Henry will be crazy excited when he learns his dad is Peter Pan.* Popping up, she said, “No custody. But visits? Sure. We can discuss it.”

Mary-Margaret splashed like a child. “Charming, here I come!”

Neal commanded the largest stone in the campground with all fourteen Lost Boys sitting cross-legged before him. Back in Neverland, they'd played this game—him pretending to be a grownup and his crew pretending to be the sort of boys that cared. This morning, he hoped to occupy them long enough to avoid their getting an eyeful of the bathing beauties—not that he'd have minded one himself. Ah, Emma.

“I don't hear splashing,” Tootles said. “Does that mean they're done?”

“Did I give you permission to speak?” Neal said. “First Twin, how will we know the women are done?”

“When all four come back with wet hair.”
Neal nodded solemnly. “Very good. Top of the class. Gold star.”

Second Twin raised his hand. Neal counted to ten before pointing to him.

“Peter, if you really are a grownup, you can't pretend to be a grownup, can you?”

Neal leaned forward with his best Toshiro Mifune samurai glower. “Do I look like a grownup?”

Second Twin frowned. “Yes.”

“But does looking like a grownup make me a grownup? How can we know for sure?”

Wriggling all over, little Alfie shot up his hand. Without waiting for Neal to acknowledge him, he shouted, “Grownups spoil everything!”

“That's right,” Neal said. “Altogether now: Grownups spoil everything!” As he led his crew through a full twelve renditions of the cheer, he thought to himself, *we do, we do.*

Charming recorded August’s statements on both the hit-and-run and the slug fest in front of the police station. Emma would be proud of how her dear old dad was catching on to this detective stuff. Now he needed photos of August’s injuries for evidence.

“The camera's set up in the squad room,” he said.

*Not that the Storybrooke Police will ever need a squad,* Charming thought as he stood, edged past the table and out the door of the cramped evidence storage room. In the Enchanted Forest, arrests had required superior numbers or a really good freezing spell. In this world, even evil wizards accepted the authority of the badge.

Seeing the scowl on Rumplestiltskin’s face as he passed him in the hall gave Charming some measure of satisfaction. *Try waiting twenty-nine years to spend a night with your wife only to have some ass of a wizard sidetrack her with a wraith. I'll show you frustrated.*

In Storybrooke, only King George didn't accept his say-so—but that's what jail cells were for. Now the ex-monarch murderer occupied one, awaiting a decision on what would be done with him.

Over his shoulder, Charming said, “Don't mind King George. He's all snarl, no teeth.” Looking back, he saw August wasn't following him. Of all the dumb things he could have done, he'd stopped to talk to Rumplestiltskin.

“No, really,” August was saying. “You have to come to my party.”

*What's wrong with that guy? Doesn't he know nobody ever invites Rumplestiltskin?* Shaking his head, Charming turned around and walked back down the hall. Stopping, he locked eyes with August, hoping to warn him without words. Instead, the twit grinned at him.

“Tell Mr. Gold his presence is mandatory,” August said. “If it weren't for his hocus pocus, I wouldn't be having a bon voyage at all.”

Charming saw the wizard wave a hand in one of his typical *what do you expect I can do anything* gestures. With growing unease, he watched August lean down until he was right in the wizard's face. “My plan is to get you drunk, so you'll spill all your secrets.”

Alarmed at August's words, Charming darted a glance at Rumplestiltskin. The wizard's faint smile looked ominous. “If you knew any more of my secrets, I'd have to kill you.”
August burst out laughing. Then he winked at Charming. “It’s funny ’cause it’s true.”

Charming swallowed hard and grabbed August’s arm. “Please. Let’s take those pictures.” But the idiot kept gazing at Rumplestiltskin.

The wizard tapped his cane on the floor. Charming wondered if perhaps it was actually a magical staff that could summon demons or maybe another wraith.

But instead of wielding magic, Rumplestiltskin laid the cane across his lap. “I'll check my calendar.”

As soon as Acting Sheriff Charming and Pinocchio went around the corner into the squad room, Mr. Gold redialed the Game of Thorns. This time Moe picked up.

“Game of Thorns. The right floral arrangement for any celebration.” The voice was bright and chipper, the Backlands accent achingly reminiscent of Belle’s. A pity it was her arrogant, son-of-a-bitch father.

“Do your floral arrangements include funeral wreaths? Despite your best efforts last night, I won’t be needing one.”

Dead silence. Then, “Is this… Rumplestiltskin?”

Mr. Gold gripped the head of his cane. Like the time they’d clashed in his search for Belle, Moe French had assumed the airs of Sir Maurice—the aristocrat who’d haughtily called him beast yet relinquished his daughter to him anyway. “Do I hear surprise?”

“No, shock. Why on earth would you call—”

“To let you know your plan to have Mr. Smee run me over failed. I’m perfectly fine. Not a scratch on me.” Mr. Gold paused. “I was thrown clear.”

Just as quickly as he’d become Sir Maurice, Moe reverted to a fuming, spluttering working stiff. “I don’t know what you’re ranting about, you bat-shit mental little man. Smee’s been home two days puking his guts out with the flu. If I ever hear a car’s run you down, I’ll throw a party. Until then, I’m happy knowing Belle’s left you, you twisted little—”

Mr. Gold lowered the cell phone to his lap. He hated acknowledging it, but the self-righteousness sounded genuine. He rubbed the bridge of his nose feeling like a fool. He’d been correct about Smee. The man had taken off sick to do his dirty deed. But once again, he’d been woefully wrong about Belle’s father.

When he brought his phone back to his ear, Moe was still seething. “I believe you,” Mr. Gold muttered and ended the call.

Charming gestured for August to roll his jeans leg higher, so he could get a good photo of the scrape on his knee.

Behind him, he could hear King George pacing his cell. The jail was only meant to hold prisoners overnight, but the county lockup was on the other side of the Storybrooke border. At the town hall meeting, they’d decide what to do with him, so long as it’s not up to me.

“Sheepherder, my captain slammed wooden boy against the wall last night. His backside is likely sporting some impressive bruises—or splinters.”
Charming ignored King George. The set of pictures he was taking would stand up in court without a disgraced monarch-slash-district-attorney advising him. He was having less luck imparting a word-to-the-wise to August.

Finally, Charming said, “You don’t know Rumplestiltskin like I do—”

King George snorted. “Hah. You don’t know him like I do. After my wonderful James died, he said my son could still slay a dragon for King Midas. Does he bring my son back to life? No. He saddles me with this look-alike ingrate who’s not worth a hair on James’s head.”

Charming bit his lip. He knew that was why Rumplestiltskin had chosen his twin for King George to adopt. In case of an accident, he could trot out a spare.

Looking up from the digital camera with his warmest smile, he told August, “Don’t mind King George.” Then he added, “I did slay the dragon.”

August turned around—just like the king had suggested. Pulling up his leather jacket and shirt, he displayed a nasty abrasion along his spine. “Well, neither of you know Mr. Gold like I do. He changed me from marionette to human once and for all. Of course, I’m grateful. I can’t say it any plainer.”

“But at what price, wooden boy?” King George asked. “He tricked me into betraying my family’s fairy godmother. He played upon my desperation.”

Though he hated agreeing with the king, Charming nodded. “Whether he's Rumplestiltskin or Mr. Gold, there's always a price.” How could August not know that? He snapped a picture.

The fool shook his head. “No price. Not really. Mr. Gold helped me because Jiminy asked him and because he likes my dad. But I can't deny he got a kick out of annoying the Blue Fairy.”

Charming held out his hands. “See what I mean? What kind of creature doesn't like fairies?” The Dark One, that's what kind.

“He made my family's fairy godmother disappear,” King George said.

August narrowed his eyes. “Are we done?” Without waiting for a response, he tucked his jeans cuff back into his scuffed boot and started across the squad room. “I'll be out of the country for a few weeks. You have my card if you need to contact me.”

“Hey, just a—” Charming started after him, hoping to get in one more argument. By the time he entered the hallway, August was already huddled with Rumplestiltskin.

“One?” August asked.

“A little earlier,” Rumplestiltskin replied.

“Thanks.”

Charming saw Rumplestiltskin twist his head to watch August continue down the hall. Pointedly ignoring me, he thought.

Reaching the corner, August looked back at Rumplestiltskin. “Text me if you decide to come to my party. I'll need to stock up on firstborn baby croquettes.”

Rumplestiltskin didn't reply, but Charming heard him chuckle. Could he be any more evil?
Chapter End Notes

Any comments?
Rumpelstiltskin (Mr. Gold): Question my motives all you like, dearie, but they shall remain mine.
(The Cricket Game)

Smee had to hand it to the rusty biscuit tin—or at least the sinister mastermind that spoke through it. Its info was legit. No supernatural hazards guarded the backdoor to Mr. Gold's mansion—only a pin-and-tumbler lock and a deadbolt. In under three minutes, Smee's tension wrench, c-rake, and short hook had breached them both.

Of course, the voice behind the tin should recognize that partnering with Smee had been smart, too. Hadn't he been right all along that Mr. Gold was still the Dark One? His skin, eyes, and nails might not be worthy of the name crocodile, but he fairly reeked of black magic. That beauty of a Pontiac Streamliner Wagon had verified the attribute Smee envied most—invincibility. Only the Dark One has life eternal.

That is, unless Smee could find the mystical dagger the tin box said was sure to be in the Dark One's house. Smee wondered how much time he had to scurry and scavenge around the wizard's ridiculously large Victorian undisturbed. The first time he'd been here, he'd helped Moe help himself to antique knickknacks from the parlor. The second time, he'd spent an anxious hour strung up in the basement, spinning lies to the Dark One about the whereabouts of Captain Hook.

Well, this time Smee was in charge. He knew how to search for a hard-to-find object without getting caught. When he left, even the Dark One wouldn't guess he'd been here.

Inside Room 104, Mr. Gold took one look at the caster wheels on the bottom of the chair Charming expected him to use and sighed. With nothing to brace the rollers, the risk of a pratfall was too great. He'd learned long ago with Cora that one could never afford to look weak. Centering his cane in front of him for stability, he smiled.

“You prefer standing?” Charming asked.

“I wouldn't want to get too comfortable,” Mr. Gold replied.

Charming rocked his chair back on two legs. “August likes to live close to the edge, doesn't he—talking to you that way.”

“You mean… the quip? August wasn't directing it at me. He meant it for the sort of fool who believes a silly tale told to scare children. Someone like…” Mr. Gold raised his eyebrows, but Charming missed the point.
"As long as you didn't take it as an insult."

Mr. Gold shook his head. "I know you think I'm evil. I can live with that. But that you think I'm petty—that's really too much."

"Petty?"

"Think about it. Even if August had meant to insult me, what then? Have I ever—either here or in the Enchanted Forest—been known to take anyone to task over an insult? Is that my reputation? If I had retaliated every time someone verbally abused me since the curse broke, Storybrooke would be crawling with snails instead of people—and you would have been the first to spread your slime around."

Charming frowned. "Show respect for the badge."

"Or you'll what? Throw me into the cell next to King George... for insulting you?" Mr. Gold felt a twinge in his bad leg. He leaned forward on his cane to shift the weight. "I take deals people make very seriously. They can talk about me as they like."

Charming clicked on the tape recorder. "So... who do you think got tired of talk and decided to run you down?"

"Must I do your job for you? "Mr. Smee was the driver. That much is obvious."

Charming cocked his head. "But he came forward—"

"—to insinuate himself into your investigation." Mr. Gold couldn't keep impatience from his voice. "That's well-known criminal behavior, dearie. You have no education or experience—actual or implanted—to qualify you for this job, but at least watch a television cop show once in a while. You might get some hints."

"A perpetrator insinuating himself into an investigation—that's common?" Charming widened his blue eyes.

"Elementary, in fact."

"Like a lawyer offering free services to keep tabs on a murder investigation?"

Mr. Gold smiled. Touché for Charming. "No. That's more likely a good-hearted soul helping an innocent who's been accused and abandoned by those she trusted most." When Charming's mouth twitched, Mr. Gold knew his jab had struck home. "But Mr. Smee's not the type to stage an accident and keep tabs on it for personal reasons. Someone's paying him."

Charming sighed. "You think Moe French—"

"No," Mr. Gold broke in. He had to hurry this along. His leg was starting to hurt.

"No?" Charming folded his arms. "While I was interviewing August, Moe stopped being a suspect?"

"Yes.” Mr. Gold gritted his teeth against a muscle spasm. He couldn't stand like this much longer. "As far as identifying others who bear me ill will, do your job. If you come across anyone who's angry the magic they begged for worked too well or who resents having been held to a deal they asked to make, tell them I'm open to renegotiation. I can't resolve their dissatisfactions if I'm dead."

His bad leg throbbing, Mr. Gold turned toward the door.
“Hey,” Charming said. “I'm not done. If you prefer, I'll get a warrant to search your business records for likely suspects.”

His back to Charming, Mr. Gold clenched his teeth. Damn you. In the outside world, he knew no one would ever authorize such a warrant, but Storybrooke's court was another thing.

He turned around with a beatific smile. “If this interview is going to drag on, I'd appreciate some coffee. I'm sure you made a pot in Emma's office this morning.” When Charming drummed his fingers on the table, Mr. Gold added, “Sharing coffee with a witness to put them at ease—that's—'

“—a well-known investigative technique?”

“—something Emma would have done.”

Charming switched off the recorder and stood. “Okay. You got me. I wouldn't mind another cup myself.”

Mr. Gold remained perfectly still except for the trembling in his bad leg. The instant the door clicked shut behind Charming, he nudged the rolling chair against a metal evidence locker. He about-faced, then shuffled backwards until his legs bumped the seat. One hand gripping his cane, he stretched the other down until it lay flat on the cushion. He extended his bad leg, trusting his weight to the other. All right, steady… Slowly, he lowered himself. Hearing the acting sheriff in the hall, he scooted his chair up to the table. Then he nestled his cane in the crook of his arm and laced his fingers.

Charming called out, “My hands are full. Could you open the door?”

Mr. Gold sucked air through his teeth. Damn you, Charming. “I can't. My leg is…”

Silence. Then the knob twisted. A moment later, Charming shouldered the door wide and plunked Mr. Gold's paper cup in front of him. Coffee sloshed over the side. Then he closed the door and took a sip from his porcelain mug.

“You fixed Dr. Whale's arm. Why don't you—”

“Fix my leg?” Mr. Gold smiled brightly. “I'd miss all the sympathy it gets me.”

“Health inspector,” Emma announced, standing in front of the pair of rocks Slightly called the door to his kitchen. According to Mary-Margaret, Neal had recommended turning their appraisal of the Lost Boys' food stores into a playing-at-grownups game. She could see Slightly sniggering behind a pyramid of pumpkins.

“Open up,” Mary-Margaret added, brandishing a makeshift broom, “or you're under arrest.”

The boy cook hopped up, scampered over, and mimed opening a door.

“Now run along,” Emma said, marching past him as stiffly as a tin soldier. “This is a super-secret-surprise inspection.”

Smirking, Slightly retreated. When Emma bent over to pick up rotting pumpkin rind, she saw him spying from behind an elderberry shrub. Good. They needed to make their task look like a game he'd want to play in the future.

Mary-Margaret began sweeping. “Neal said that as far as he can figure, Neverland is free of pathogens and vermin. No bacteria, viruses, germs. No flies, maggots, rats. In Neverland, food never
ever goes bad.”

Emma followed her nose to a basket, lifted the lid, and felt her stomach heave. The strips of possibly rabbit meat inside crawled with larvae. “It goes bad here.”

“Neal said—”

“Enough, already. I get it.” Emma slammed down the lid and faced her mother. “Peter Pan has grown up. He's trying to be responsible. Tonight before I start watch duty, I'll discuss Henry with him. Stop bringing it up.”

Mary-Margaret chewed her lip. “I forgot to tell you. Neal's father is in Storybrooke. They're… estranged.”

Oh, no. In-laws. “So thoughts of daddy aren't pure joy?”

“That's right.” Mary-Margaret looked relieved at Emma's quick assessment. “If we have any hope of helping Neal fly, it's best to avoid talking about his father until we're home. If he mentions him, steer the conversation away. Interrupt him if you have to.”

“Neal's dad is taboo. Got it.” Emma hoisted the basket of slop. The only thing it was good for now was dumping down a pit of lightning sand.

David watched Rumplestiltskin shift in his chair. What's he hiding? At last the wizard said, “That's all I recall about the accident. If there's nothing else—”

Time for my real questions, David thought and switched off the recorder. “Why weren't you injured?”

Rumplestiltskin stared at him a moment. “Sorry to disappoint you, Acting Sheriff, but apparently I was thrown clear.”

“Seriously?” David laughed. “I don't think thrown clear means what you think it means. Sure it's better to be thrown over the top of a vehicle than to be dragged under its wheels. But that's not the same as walking away without a scratch, which is what you did.”

“I was… lucky.”

“Both Mr. Smee and August described you as hitting the bumper, the windshield, the back of the car, and the pavement. Your clothing was torn up, your cane was cracked, but you're not even bruised. How come?”

Rumplestiltskin pressed his lips together. Then he pressed himself back against his chair as if distancing himself from the question altogether. Finally, he gave a tight little shrug. “Why do you think I'm unharmed?”

“For the same reason I couldn't harm you in our sword-fight way back when. The Dark One can't be harmed.”

Rumplestiltskin raised his eyebrows. “Do I look like the Dark One?”

“Does Mother Superior look like a fairy? But when the dwarfs have mined enough diamonds for her kind of magic, I expect we’ll see some fairy wings.”

Rumplestiltskin flicked his glance to the ceiling and back down again.
David lifted his chin. “Just because you don't look like the Dark One, doesn't mean you won't soon. Don't pretend you wouldn't be happy to return to your natural state.”

Every muscle in Rumplestiltskin's face went rigid. Between clenched teeth, he repeated, “My natural state?”

David stared at him. What did I say wrong?

“This is my natural state, dearie.” Rumplestiltskin rapped his cane on the floor. “Bum leg and all. The being you knew in the Enchanted Forest was a man under a curse. That's common knowledge. How can you be, so ignorant?”

“Common knowledge?” David shook his head. “The first time I met you, I referred to you as a man. Afterwards, my mother explained you were something else altogether.”

So softly David almost missed it, Rumplestiltskin whispered, “Imp, beast, monster.” Nodding, he picked up his coffee. “You're right. I did guard that secret. In the Enchanted Forest, when people heard curse, their first thought was how to break it—and their motives were rarely benevolent. If I'd lost my powers then, well...” Setting the cup back down, he smiled. Then he flourished his hand in a gesture eerily reminiscent of the Dark One he was denying. “Now that I've broken it myself, I've mentioned it to one or two people in Storybrooke. I'd assumed they'd gossiped.”

Broken it? “You've thrown quite a bit of magic around lately. If it was the curse that granted you powers, then it's very much intact.”

“Your analysis is uninformed.” Rumplestiltskin's smile seemed pleasant, but irritation lined his forehead. “I don't have powers in that sense at all anymore—only knowledge due to long years of study and practice. The real power is in Storybrooke. If you have any complaints, look to yourself, Snow, and Emma. You created the magic. I merely harness it.”

David ran his eyes across Rumplestiltskin's face. If only he had Emma's skill at spotting a lie. “I wish you'd had the decency to ask us before dumping this purple passion potion of yours down the well. If it really was my family's true love, why did it make such an evil-looking fog?”

“Dr. Whale's not complaining. Neither are Pinocchio or Ruby. And tell me, how was Henry's sleep last night?”

Excellent. In fact, the wizard's talisman had provided so much control that the sleeping curse netherworld had gone from terrifying to intriguing. At breakfast, Henry had said he was about to make a friend.

“Better,” David said.

Rumplestiltskin exhaled slowly. “Well, then. How can you call that evil?”

Talk about selective memory. David folded his arms. “So that wraith—it was a true love wraith?”

Rumplestiltskin grimaced. After a moment, he said, “The wraith was... dark magic. I'll grant you that. But my intention in using dark magic to call upon it was justice—summary justice, mustered in the heat of the moment, exacted by a biased party and, therefore, flawed, but as of now, the only justice Regina has faced.”

David leaned back. “So... what did she do to you?” He'd heard everybody else's story in town. Now he'd hear the wizard's too.
“To me?” Rumplestiltskin waved a hand as if that was of no consequence. Then he leaned forward. “Did you ever wonder how a young woman as intelligent, interesting, and appealing as Belle could be unknown in Storybrooke until the day the curse broke?”

David raised his shoulders. “I’d assumed you’d kept her captive somewhere.”

Rumplestiltskin blinked several times. “You just managed to say something that goes beyond insult.” He took a deep breath. “In fact, I’m having a vision of you sliding along an ivy leaf right now.”

The wizard’s abnormally wide eyes stared at him so intently, David began to feel uncomfortable. So Moe was wrong? Belle didn’t spend thirty years as Rumplestiltskin’s slave? As a hostage of the Evil Queen himself, he had to admit her palace had been chock-a-block with cells. He wouldn’t put it past her to have imprisoned someone in Storybrooke as well. “Obviously, I didn’t have the full picture. But would killing Regina be justice for locking someone up? Even if she’d locked that person up for a really long time?”

“The wraith wouldn’t have killed her—just ripped out her soul. After thirty years had passed—the length of time she held Belle against her will—her soul could have been returned. That is, if anyone had cared enough to tuck Regina’s body away for safekeeping.”

Rumplestiltskin’s eyelids flickered. “If what I’d intended had occurred, I would take full responsibility. But it’s not my fault Emma and Snow White chose to throw themselves between the wraith and its prey.”

David knew better than to say it aloud, but at this moment, the being on the far side of the table was the Dark One even if its form was human.

“Nevertheless,” Rumplestiltskin continued, “I know what magic will bring them back to Storybrooke.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope the balance of points-of-view works. Comments?
A Deal You Want to Make

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold faces facts.

Belle sees an opening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Deal You Want to Make

Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin): You see, contracts—deals—well, they're the very foundation of all civilized existence (The Price of Gold).

Charming repeated Rumplestiltskin's words to himself: I know what magic will bring them back to Storybrooke. Though he hated giving the wizard the satisfaction, he grinned. And kudos to Belle for recognizing the magic books when she'd come across them boxed up in the library attic.

“So,” Charming said, “what magic will get Snow and Emma home?”

“So, what magic will get Snow and Emma home?”

“Why, true love potion, of course. That's what I need to create a portal. One vial equals a cartload of fairy dust.”

“Like the one you dumped down the well? As simple as that?” Why didn't you come up with this sooner?

Rumplestiltskin leaned back in his chair, clearly in his element. “The potion that brought magic to Storybrooke was complex, of course. The arrow you took for Snow, the bite of the cursed apple she took for you, you securing the vial inside Dragon Maleficent, Emma slaying the dragon to take it back—all of those acts played a part in increasing the potion's power.”

Charming’s grin faded. “Emma and I faced the dragon in deals we made with you, sure. But you're making it sound like everything we did was part of your plan.”

Tilting his head, Rumplestiltskin smiled. “Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger, dearie. Those acts intensified your love. If the potion benefited, you did as well.”

Damn, you're a manipulative son-of-a-bitch. “I think I can speak for my wife and daughter when I say nobody wants to risk their life just to benefit a potion.”

“Not necessary.” Rumplestiltskin waved his hand. “Instead of one vial of super-powerful—as you, so poetically put it—purple passion potion, I'll make do with three of lesser strength. The only sacrifices required will be single strands of hair.”

That simple! Charming drew a deep breath. Time to change the sheets. Snow's coming home.

Reaching up to pull out some hairs, he said, “My wife's I can get from her brush.”

Rumplestiltskin shook his index finger. “Not your hair. Nor Snow's. True love potion can't be mass
produced. Rather than a formula, it's more like a test. If the result is positive, it's potent. But repeating
the assay is tantamount to doubting the previous result, which renders it useless.”

“Meaning?”

“If I evaluate yours and Snow's hairs a second time, the magic now in Storybrooke would vanish—
and you wouldn't want that.”

“Why not?” To Charming, revoking Rumplestiltskin's ability to throw fireballs sounded attractive.

“Because the only way I know to link the Enchanted Forest to a world without magic is…
unpleasant.” The wizard returned a crooked smile. “Better to link magic to magic.”

Charming shrugged. “Three vials?” He knew at least three couples in true love.

“Yes. One to repair the damage in Jefferson's hat, another to activate it, and a third to target the
Enchanted Forest portal to the exact spot where Snow and Emma are.”

Jefferson's hat. Charming's mind flashed a picture of King George tossing Snow's-and-Emma's-best-
hope-of-return into a beach bonfire—the deposed monarch's last little screw you before being
arrested. Groaning, Charming clamped a hand over his eyes. When he lowered it, he saw
Rumplestiltskin scowling.

“Don't tell me something happened to the Mad Hatter's hat.”

Charming picked up his coffee mug and took three rapid sips.

“Appalling.” Rumplestiltskin shook his head. “One of the seven most remarkable magical objects to
ever cross my path and you let something happen to it?” His stare said Charming was one of the
seven most pitiful. “Is nothing salvageable?”

Charming shook his head. Even the ashes had likely washed out to sea.

Dropping his chin to his chest, Rumplestiltskin gazed at his own hands. Charming watched the clock
on the far wall.

After a full minute, the wizard spoke. “Nine vials. Four to create a portal on each end and one to
target.” He flicked his glance at Charming. “Collect as many likely specimens as you can and bring
them to my shop. Be careful to identify the source of each hair. I can't work the magic if I don't have
the names.”

_Do I know nine couples in the throes of true love?_ Charming sighed. Maybe he should wait on the
sheets. “Well, that's it, then.”

Rumplestiltskin lifted his chin. “Not quite. I haven't told you my terms.”

Charming couldn't believe his ears. He sat up tall to look down his nose at Rumplestiltskin.
“Seriously? Your wraith sends my family to another universe. But you won't help without a deal?” _Is
that why you didn't solve this sooner, you calculating bastard? You were stalling to jack up the
price?_”

Rumplestiltskin held up a hand. “Hear me out. I'm not asking for much. Your wild speculations
about my lack of injury—keep them to yourself. If you put fear into people's heads that soon the
Dark One will be roaming Storybrooke, they might decide to attack now. I don't fancy trying to
outrun a mob hobbling with my cane.”
The wizard's request was minor—which made it all the more suspicious. “What if I agree that waiting until you're all-powerful wouldn't be wise?”

“And do what, dearie? Lock me in a dungeon without a trial again?” Rumplestiltskin grinned, so broadly that the creases in his cheeks reminded Charming of a jack-o'-lantern. “Wouldn't that hinder my working my magic to retrieve your family?”

Of course, the wizard was right. But Charming wanted to drag this out to gauge his reaction. Leaning back, he folded his arms. “I'd have to consider what's best for the town. I'm the sheriff—acting sheriff—after all.” Not to mention that after deposing Regina from her position as mayor, his fellow citizens had reinstated him as their rightful king.

Rumplestiltskin fixed his uncanny brown eyes on him. “If you want what's best for Storybrooke, then leave such notions as preemptive law and order behind in the Enchanted Forest. There are no monarchies in the state of Maine. Here you can't incarcerate someone based on your personal hypotheses. You have to respect people's rights—at least if you want people to respect the badge.”

Charming stared right back—the better not to betray his inner alarm at this new evidence the stories were true: The imp can read people's minds. “So long as you do the same, Gold.”

Rumplestiltskin clapped a hand over his heart. “I do solemnly swear: no turning deal breakers into pigs—even temporarily. In Storybrooke I'll rely on small claims court.”

And it won't hurt if I keep an eye on you, too, Charming thought.

During his innumerable years of adventuring, Smee had acquired many hard-to-find objects. Each time, as early as possible, he'd profited from them—spending the money on once-in-a-lifetime pleasures… rare vintages, costly courtesans, pleasure cruises. As Smee trawled the vast Victorian mansion, he saw that the Dark One had acquired more astounding treasures than he ever had—and apparently had kept all of them.

Smee had picked through the plunder-packed basement and first two floors with no joy. Along the way, he'd nicked a few less-than-unique items he was sure wouldn't be missed—a handful of gold doubloons from an overflowing chest, a pearl choker from a lady's coat pocket, and a diamond cravat pin from a wardrobe floor. Now he was exploring the third floor with only the attic above him.

If the Dark One's lair held the dagger that could kill or enslave him, Smee would find it. And this time, the profit would be huge.

As Mr. Gold rode away from the sheriff's station in the back of an Avalon Chauffeur Services Cadillac, his mind replayed Charming's words: The Dark One can't be harmed. Until he'd faced the sheriff's questions about the accident, he'd blithely denied the obvious. Coming to Storybrooke hadn't broken his curse—only rendered it dormant. When he'd poured the vial of true love potion down the town well and brought magic to Storybrooke, he'd reawakened it.

Just because you don't look like the Dark One, doesn't mean you won't soon. That thought was chilling. Zoso had known the trick of concealing his Dark One characteristics to look like an ordinary man. In the quarter of a millennium Rumplestiltskin had held that title in the Enchanted Forest, he'd never accomplished it—even with Cora's ridicule as motivation. That's why the curse-suppressing magic of Belle's kiss had taken him by surprise.

In Storybrooke, for the short blissful weeks she'd shared his life, her true love magic must have been
what had kept him human. But now? Was he maintaining a façade through some sort of—as Dr. Hopper would put it—unconscious block? If so, would a stray wrong thought reveal the imp?

Mr. Gold rubbed his forehead. *My speculations are wilder than Charming’s.*

“Is everything okay?”

He glanced up to see the hulking blond driver watching him in the rear-view mirror. “Just a headache, Skyr.”

Mr. Gold knew a secret about Avalon Chauffeur Services that would have made many in Storybrooke nervous: it was one hundred percent ogre owned and operated. But like the rodents that ran Franklin's garage, the fairies at the convent, and the town's cricket psychologist—the dozen or, so ogres who'd been brought to Storybrooke enjoyed human form. Luckily for them, the curse being broken, their memories returning, and magic flooding the town hadn't changed that.

Mr. Gold chewed his lip. *But none of them live under the spell of an infernal dagger.*

As the Cadillac Fleetwood pulled up in front of his shop, Mr. Gold saw Pinocchio riding his motorcycle toward them. “A minute,” he said to Skyr.

How his acquaintance with the young man had grown, so friendly, Mr. Gold couldn't explain. Hadn't Pinocchio used his love for his lost boy to trick him? And hadn't Pinocchio's purpose been to get his hands on the dagger, so he could subject the Dark One to his will?

Of course, Pinocchio's brazen *I command thee* had failed, so abysmally, it had almost been funny. And his blunder had answered Mr. Gold's most burning question: in a world without magic, the dagger held no power over him. His relief had played a large part in his sparing the young man's life. And learning Pinocchio's motivation—fear that he was reverting to wood—had brought out the pragmatist in Mr. Gold. He had always found desperate souls to be useful.

As he watched Pinocchio park his bike, Mr. Gold wondered whether his generosity had been wise. He lowered his window. “Hey.”

The young man grinned and waved. Despite himself, Mr. Gold felt his mouth curve in an answering smile. He had no logical reason to trust Pinocchio. Sure, the young man was full of jovial good will. He was also an irresponsible, pleasure-seeking liar not above taking advantage when he could. And yet… Maybe the fact they'd confronted each other in a life-or-death situation and survived was the reason they got along, so well now.

Sauntering up to Mr. Gold's window, Pinocchio asked, “Am I too early?”

“Your timing helps me. I have a favor to ask.”

Pinocchio chuckled. “The sheriff and King George said you always have a price. But you know, doesn't everyone? You're doing me a solid with Ruby. What can I do for you?”

“I need to check on something at home. Could you watch my shop while I'm gone? I'm closed for inventory, but some people have appointments. Mrs. Blue is picking up her son's horn. Mr. Katt is retrieving his fiddle. And all four of the Bremen Town Musicians want their songbooks.”

“Oh, yes. The charity concert. It's right before my party.”

Mr. Gold handed Pinocchio his shop keys. “The items are by the cash register. These are rightful owner claims, so no charges. Just make sure everyone signs their chit. Otherwise… enjoy your time
with Ruby.” Reaching for his wallet to tip Skyr, he said, “Please call Avalon and tell Gryla I’m keeping the car for the day. They can pick you up here.”

A few minutes later, Mr. Gold was driving himself home. When the Dark One's dagger had proven itself powerless, he'd squirreled it away in his attic—a relic of his past. Now that he feared the thing was toxic again, he needed to rebury it without delay.

Pinocchio stood behind Mr. Gold's counter feeling pleased with himself. Tom Yao and Jack Barking had picked up their items with little fuss. The third Bremen Town Musician had been suspicious about the pawnbroker-antique-restorer-lawyer-wizard leaving anyone in charge of his shop. As Storybrooke's judge, Mr. Crower had worked with Mr. Gold in court—before regaining his memory and quitting to pursue his calling as a tenor. But after a couple of pointed questions, the sapient-rooster-turned-human had shrugged. “Why should I care?”

*And everyone signed their claim.* All in all, Pinocchio felt he was handling Mr. Gold's business rather well. Playing shop owner for an hour had given him an idea for another character to include in his new thriller.

*Can't wait for Monday.* That's when he'd be flying out. Pinocchio's eyes strayed to the velvet-lined display box of pawned rings next to a chipped china cup. Some of them sported nifty-looking diamonds that would extend his stay in Singapore beyond a few weeks—give him more time to research his novel. Turning away, he slapped his own cheek. *Be good!* he told himself. *And if you can't be good, at least don't be stupid.*

The little bell rang, and the door swung open, revealing a sweet young thing in a short blue lace dress carrying a large paper bag. Even wearing the highest-heeled red pumps he'd ever seen in Storybrooke, she was still petite. When she noticed him, her sudden smile was engaging. *If this is Mrs. Blue, she's a MILF,* Pinocchio thought.

“Where's Rumple?” she asked. “I brought his lunch. Ruby was busy, and it was on my way…”

*Ruby's busy?* Pinocchio's shoulders sagged. “Mr. Gold had an urgent errand. I'm watching his shop for a bit. Are you—”

“Well,” she said, walking up to the counter, bringing the aroma of fish and chips with her. “I'd hoped that Rumple…” As her words trailed off, Pinocchio noted her smile drooping.

“You know, I've never heard anyone call him a nickname before. You must be… close.”

Belle looked down, released a soft “Hmm” and swung the fish-and-chips bag. Finally, she said, “We knew each other before. I was his housekeeper. For his rather large estate.” Her own choice of words seemed to amuse her. When she looked up again, she was biting back a grin.

*Housekeeper. Never heard that one before. Good job, Mr. Gold.* “So what about Storybrooke?”

“He didn't tell you?” Belle cocked her head. “I've never known Rumple to trust anyone to look after his shop. I'd have thought you were close.”

Pinocchio leaned down, elbows on the counter. “Not, so close that Mr. Gold would tell me who he's keeping house with.”

Belle laughed, clearly embarrassed. “I confess. We were. But then—” She placed the takeout bag on the counter. She straightened it to align with the edge. “During the curse, I spent rather a long time locked up. When it broke, Rumple and I, hmm—we found each other. And it was…” Her words
trailed off in a long, dreamy sigh. “But we had some issues. Rumple, you see... hmm. Mainly, I—I needed some freedom, a chance to stand on my own two feet. Now that I'm the librarian, have my own apartment, have a life, well, I miss... sharing my stories.”

That such an amiable young woman would ask after Mr. Gold made Pinocchio smile—and he couldn't explain why. Maybe the fact the man had threatened to cut him with a dagger, incinerate him in his bed, and torture his newly human flesh—but didn't—was the reason he felt, so warmly toward him now.

“So Ruby had the brilliant idea of sending you to casually drop off his lunch.” Pinocchio rubbed his bearded jaw. “Want to hear something funny? Mr. Gold suggested I come to his shop today, so I could run into Ruby—casually tell her the story of how I fended off King George's men.”

Belle's eyebrows rose. “I'd been wondering why your face looks, so banged up.”

Pinocchio returned a crooked smile. “I don't suppose Ruby's mentioned me? August?”

“The author?” Belle lifted her chin. “You're the one who can come and go from Storybrooke as he pleases. The library has six copies of each of your novels, yet we still have a waiting list. Everybody wants to read the homeboy's take on the great wide world. Ruby's favorite is 'Rendezvous in Kathmandu.' She bought a new copy for herself.”

“You made my day.” That Ruby had been willing to pay full list price was a very good sign indeed. Pinocchio shifted his weight. “I'm about to fly to Singapore. I'm throwing a going away party Friday night at my Dad's after the concert. Do you think you and Ruby—? Or is it too soon? I know her friend Billy just died.”

“He's definitely on Ruby's mind.” Belle sighed. “Maybe she can drop in to say goodbye.”

The shop bell rang again. A tall, chunky woman ambled through the door wearing orange stretch pants and a black t-shirt of Miles Davis blowing his trumpet. “I'm Mrs. Blue. Where's Gold?”

“He was called away. But I have your boy's horn.” To Belle he said, “If Ruby's not up to it, I'll call when I get back. But I hope you can come. Mr. Gold's going to check his calendar.”

Belle pursed her lips. “Hmm.”

Chapter End Notes

With all the importance placed on true love and the true love potion in the first two seasons, I'd expected to see it again--and particularly one made by Mr. Gold to test his own true love.
The Right Thing to Do

Chapter Summary

Rumple makes his case.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Right Thing to Do

**Emma:** Oh, that's really not fair. *(The Price of Gold).*

Smee was on Mr. Gold's third floor rifling his dozenth antique armoire when he heard the front door open. He froze, praying it was a cleaning lady. Then a cane tapped the hardwood two floors below, and Smee's stomach clenched. How long would it take the gimp to limp up the stairs?

As quietly as a bilge rat caught in the captain’s quarters, Smee guided the wardrobe door shut. He took a moment to squat and remove his shoes. Dangling them by their shoelaces, he tiptoed out of the bedroom and past the grand staircase landing. Though he could easily outrun Mr. Gold, he daren’t try. Likely, the Dark One wouldn't toss a fireball in his own house, but that left him a thousand other ways to catch and punish an intruder such as Smee.

When he heard the cane click on the stairs, Smee gulped. His only hope was to climb higher. Surely, the Dark One wouldn't traipse up to his attic.

Smee stole down the hall, clutching his doubloon-filled pocket, so it wouldn't jingle. Each time the floorboards creaked, he gnawed his lip. Reaching the latched wall panel he'd spotted earlier, he hooked his thumb in the ring pull and popped it open. *Eureka! A ladder!* Suspending his shoes from his teeth, Mr. Smee clambered up the rungs. His years of rigging sails on the Jolly Roger served him well.

At the top, he slid the hatch cover aside, pulled himself up into the attic, set down his shoes, nudged the wall panel shut, and lowered the trapdoor again.

Proud of his ingenuity, Smee grinned. *The Dark One won't even suspect I'm here.*

The room was pitch black, which was a good thing. If no light was entering—not even past the edges of the trapdoor—then no light could beam out to the floor below. Smee reached into the inside pocket of his peacoat and thrust his fingers through the hole in the lining, fumbling for his flashlight.

When he clicked it on, he saw a low, peaked, unfinished storage space packed tight. He noted a cupboard and a bookshelf accessible to searching. He'd have to wait for the Dark One to leave before moving the trunks and crates stacked against the back wall as tight as treasure in a cargo hold.

He took a step then heard the squeak of a door in the corridor below. After a painfully long minute, a toilet flushed. Smee grinned. *Even the Dark One has to take a piss now and then.*

Smee heard water running in a sink and pipes banging. Under cover of the noise, he scurried to the shelves. A quick scan showed tarnished candlesticks, geode bookends, porcelain goose girls, a pony
saddle, and a tangle of linen. He turned his light on the cupboard. *How loud will opening the drawers be?*

Smee paused. Had he been too hasty dismissing the shelves? He beamed his flashlight on the bottom one again. That pile of linen—why was it lower in the center? Was something heavy hidden inside it?

Excited, he crouched to rifle the linen. When he felt a hard, flat object beneath the cloth, his heart raced. He pulled aside the folds and dropped his jaw. *The Dark One's dagger.*

Knobbed grip, round hilt, and foot-long wavy blade—Smee had seen better weapons. Yet he knew he was staring at the most dangerous magical object ever to exist in his old world or his new. One word was embossed on the blade: *Rumplestiltskin.*

Smee wanted to whoop with joy. All he dared do was hug himself.

Then he heard scraping behind him, and his heart pounded. The trapdoor was opening.

Trembling, he extinguished his light though he knew it would make no difference. In the bric-a-brac crammed attic, where could he hide? When the Dark One poked his head through the hatch, Smee was done for.

Then he remembered the dagger.

Light from the floor below illuminated the blade. Staring at it, fear clutched his throat. How was he supposed to use it? Point it? Intone the Dark One's name? Shout *I command thee?*

Terrified, Smee extended his quivering hand toward the dagger. And then the undreamt-of happened: it rose off its bed of linen. It hovered for a fraction of a second then shot past him. He grabbed for it. The edge grazed his thumb. In the light of the hatchway, the iron gleamed. Then the dagger dropped from sight.

Helpless, Smee stared as the hatch cover settled into place. He crammed his fist into his mouth to stifle his sobs. He'd had the dagger within his grasp and lost it. If the Dark One knew it was at risk, no telling where he'd hide it.

When at last Smee heard the front door close, he collapsed on the attic floor, whimpering and sucking his cut thumb.

*That damned biscuit tin would roast him alive.*

That evening, as Belle meandered around the community center lobby, waiting for the start of the town hall meeting, she eavesdropped shamelessly. At first, she did it for Ruby. She was relieved to find that fear of the wolf that had roused the mob the night before was gone. Now that everyone knew King George had hacked up Billy to frame Ruby, sympathy had swung to her shape-shifting friend.

Then Belle noted other schisms among Storybrooke's citizens that she found disturbing.

The murder of Billy aka Gus the Mouse had rallied the beasts-turned-human to form a special interest group: The Former Sapient Animals of the Enchanted Forest. On one side of the lobby, she identified previous wolves, bears, and foxes in tête-à-tête with previous sheep, rabbits, and chickens. Ex-dogs conferred with ex-cats, and ex-cats conferred with ex-mice. Many of the former sapient animals advised caution. The rest, alarmingly, called for King George's blood.
On the other side of the lobby, Belle was even more shocked to hear lack of outrage: “Can't a king do as he pleases?” “Aren't humans—real humans—more important than beasts?” “Is killing a mouse even murder?”

Before Belle could calm herself enough to butt in, the objects of her indignation went silent and edged backwards. Turning, she saw Rumplestiltskin.

Oh. Heart-stoppingly handsome in his black suit, black silk shirt, and red-and-black tie with just the hint of a red handkerchief in his breast pocket, he entered the building with the pleasant smile she knew was his shield in a crowd. As he crossed the floor at his usual majestic pace, no one said a word to him. They merely gave way.

Belle bit her lip. Under the bright lights, the lines around his cinnamon brown eyes betrayed how little attention he was paying to his health. She recalled how restless he could be in bed, murmuring pleas to dreamland bogeymen throughout the long nights.

She continued gazing until Rumple had passed into the sparsely occupied hall and claimed an aisle seat. A call to assemble came over the public address system, and she let the crowd carry her inside.

Emma leaned against the catalpa tree at the edge of the Lost Boys’ camp, absently tearing off leaves and listening to Neal. Given what she knew about the mindset of people raised in the Enchanted Forest, his giving in to Reul Gorm wasn't surprising. He'd known her as the Ruler Of the Night, the Original Power. When she'd said you must sacrifice, Neal had asked how much?

But Emma wasn't letting him off the hook just yet.

“That's got to be the lamest excuse a guy ever gave for ditching a girl: The Blue Fairy made me do it.”

Neal hung his head. In the light of the cattail torch he'd stuck in the ground between them, Emma could see him grimace. “It sounds that way to me now, too. Papa never trusted—”

Danger zone. I need to stop him talking about his father. “Why is my fairytale some sort of she must undergo seven trials story? Why does everybody else get—” She stopped herself before she blurted out true love “—happily ever after?”

Out the corner of her eye, Emma caught her mother smiling. “Darling, happily is not as ever after as you'd think. Look at your father and me. You need to enjoy happiness when you have it, treasure your memories when it's gone, and work hard to get it back.”

In the flickering light, Emma saw Neal nodding. “My poor papa had nothing but—”

“What I don't understand,” Emma broke in, “is what happened to the twenty-thousand the fence gave you for the watches.”

“Fenced watches? Emma!” Mary-Margaret's voice was stern.

“I wouldn’t get self-righteous if I were you.” Emma folded her arms. “Didn't you tell me you met my father while robbing him?”

Her mother's upright posture slumped. “Uh, you asked Neal a question…”

“AUGUST,” Neal replied. “That's my guess. He was supposed to give you the car and the money.”
“The postmark on the envelope with the VW key was Phuket. I hope he had a good time.” Emma shook her head. “I don't want the money now, but he owes me. I want him to donate it—to improving foster care.”

“Absolutely,” Neal agreed. “A promise is a kind of deal. Papa always said that deals—”

At the word Papa, Emma started to interrupt. “August and I—” Then she stopped. “Deals? Your father has a particular interest in making deals?”

Mary-Margaret jumped in. “Maybe he's that mattress salesman. You know the one? Dealer Dan? Best deals in town?”

Emma saw the cheerful wrinkles she knew, so well fan from the corners of Neal's brown eyes as he recalled his papa. On the one hand, she wondered at her mother's insistence that thoughts of his father weren't happy. On the other, she knew the question that had crossed her mind was silly. Obviously, Neal's dad wasn't Mr. Gold.

“Snow told me you still have the VW bug.” For the first time since she'd slugged him, Emma felt Neal's eyes lock on hers. Her pulse beat in her neck. “Storybrooke's sheriff drives a stolen car?”

“Yeah, well.” Emma looked aside and tore off another catalpa leaf. Damn, if the silly thing wasn't heart-shaped. “I couldn't let go of it.”

“Why?”

“It's where I met you.”

Belle watched Acting Sheriff David Nolan. Exuding princely self-confidence in jeans and leather jacket, he called the meeting to order. He was barely into the agenda when an old woman stood up.

“Can't we cut to the chase? What are we going to do with King George?”

“We?” one of the royals blurted out from the other side of the hall. “Prince Charming defeated him. Prince Charming decides what happens to him.”

After a few more spontaneous exchanges across the audience, the schisms Belle had observed in the lobby became chasms.

Nearby, a hefty bearded man in a plaid lumberjack's coat said in a booming voice, “I'm not a Former Sapient Animal myself, but my partner is. The only justice is a death for a death.” He wrapped his arm around the equally hefty woman in blue next to him. “You know that, Charming. What're you waiting for?”

Belle could see the question alarmed David as much as it did her. “No lynching. Not on my watch.”

In front of her, a chicken man jumped up. “Beheading then! That's what he'd have done to us back home. You know I'm right, Charming.”

Behind Belle, a silky, feline voice called out, “The honor of the Former Sapient Animals of the Enchanted Forest demands it!”

“My axe is in my car,” the lumberjack announced. “Say the word, Charming, and we'll do it now.”

“Stop! Stop!” David slammed his fist on his podium. “Billy's death was a murder. No question there. King George was arrested for it, and he'll be tried. The only matter up for discussion is under which
laws and which jurisdiction.”

Near the front of the auditorium, Belle saw a long, skinny, tweed-clad arm pop up. David pointed, and Dr. Hopper sprang to his feet, his ginger hair bouncing. “Mr. Gold is a lawyer. Why don't we consult him?”

As the psychologist retook his seat, raucous objections broke out amid boos and catcalls. Belle cringed and glanced at Rumple, sitting just a few rows ahead of her. He remained upright and unmoved, letting the disapproval wash over him like surf against a rock. The fact he was used to it made her feel even worse.

David waved both hands for silence. “A legal opinion. We're just asking for a legal opinion.” When the uproar had subsided, he gestured to Rumple.

Belle could see Rumple's back rise and fall in a sigh. Then slowly, he rose to his feet. “The question is jurisdiction—where we were or where we are. In our old world, King George would never have stood trial. That's a given. There authority was established by combat or magic. Those without power like William Fromage lived at the whim of those who had it.” He took a deep breath. “This new world offers a chance for something different.”

When he paused, Belle noted that even the rustling had died down.

“Granted, King George has no appreciable power in Storybrooke. He has no castle, no knights, no army of hobnail boots, no subjects obliged to fealty. For many here, the proposal to drag him from jail and lop off his head would be their first opportunity to exercise that privilege that's been held over them for so long—honor.” Rumple paused and surveyed the now attentive audience. “But violence would be an invitation to a power struggle to establish a new autocracy. In the end, it would be just as imbalanced and capricious as what ruled the Enchanted Forest.”

In front of her, Belle heard Mr. Clark the pharmacist muttering loudly. Everyone excused him for such odd behavior. After all, he was the poor test subject who'd crossed the border—sad proof that doing so meant losing one's Enchanted Forest memories. Suddenly, he jumped up and shouted, “This is ridiculous! Billy was a man, not a talking mouse. Albert Spencer is a district attorney who went nuts, not some old king named George. Come on, folks! Be real! This fairy tale stuff is a delusion!”

Belle saw Rumple shake his head. Then he lifted one hand. As he did, every unoccupied seat in the hall rose off the floor. His index finger outlined a circle in the air, and the levitating furniture danced.

Belle stared upwards, lips parted, filled with a faint nostalgic wonder. Around her, fellow citizens screamed, wrapping their arms around their heads and cowering. Then Rumple flicked his finger, and every chair settled gently into place.

Looking back over his shoulder, he cast his weary brown eyes on Mr. Clark. “Magic exists. Deal with it.”

Mr. Clark nodded shakily. I bet he'll be ready to answer to Sneezy now, thought Belle.

Rumple returned his attention to David. “As I was saying… if Storybrooke wants to thrive under a higher code than honor and power—wants to embrace the code of equity where everyone accepts and lives under the same social contract—then King George must receive a fair and proper trial according to the laws of this world.”

With that, Rumple took a sideways step, pivoted on his cane, and slowly walked up the aisle. Again,
the hall grew noisy—but this time with the hum of conversation. Belle's gaze stayed on Rumple. She considered pushing her way down her row to follow, but that might embarrass him.

She reached into her pocket and took out her phone.

After the twins replaced Freebird and Rock in the treetop lookout posts and everyone else had gone to bed, Neal tiptoed past Tootles and picked up the mitten where Tinker Bell snuggled and snored. He shook it.

Jingling fiercely, his little friend popped out her little blonde head. “Can't a poor girl get some shut-eye?”

Neal grinned. “Could you spare a pinch of fairy dust? I'm in the mood for flying.”

Chapter End Notes

As OUaT trailed on through curse after curse, I think they lost sight of Rumple-Gold's moral code. Championing fairness can have its downside when it comes to exacting revenge, but it definitely has an upside with Rumple-Gold's reliance on fair exchange, on being trustworthy, on never trying to "take over the world," despite the fact he was more powerful than practically anyone.
Why Take the Risk?

Chapter Summary

Archie takes a risk.

Mr. Gold does not.

Mulan risks all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jefferson (The Mad Hatter): Perhaps, you’re the one that’s mad. (Hat Trick)

The whole time Archie was doing his civic duty by attending the town hall meeting, he couldn't wait to get home. The day before he'd steeled his nerves and created a Facebook profile. By suppertime, half of Storybrooke had friended him. But they weren't who he was looking for. Every few minutes, he had checked his page without success. At midnight, he'd seen it: Vincent Chalmers' reply to his invitation.

Of course, I remember the apartment we shared at SUNY. What I can't remember is how or why we lost touch.

As Mr. Gold had predicted, Archie's illusory college roommate—hijacked by the curse to be a part of his false identity—not only had memories of him but pictures as well.

Archie opened his front door slowly, blocking his rambunctious Dalmatian's escape. Immediately, his eyes sought out the photo Vincent had sent that he'd printed and framed the night before: his twenty-year-old self in a red polka-dotted shirt and white bow tie arm-in-arm with a taller twenty-year-old in a purple silk bomber jacket, fending off a deluge of streamers and confetti.

Oddly, it didn't matter to Archie that over a hundred years had passed since he'd looked twenty, that the only corner of earth he'd ever visited was Storybrooke, and that he and the handsome young man had never actually met. He now knew the curse had implanted in Vincent the same warm recollections of Mardi Gras, New Orleans, 1991. That miracle made Archie glow all over.

He dipped into his pocket and pulled out a dog biscuit. Pongo sat without being asked, his bottom wiggling in anticipation. Archie skipped the full Stay! Shake! High Five! repertoire and gave the dog his treat. Locking the door, he hurried down the hall toward his study and his waiting computer.

As he walked, a fat Persian and a lanky tabby wove around his legs. “Hi, guys,” he murmured. “No more tuna tonight.”

Entering his study, he turned to his desk. Atop it a scruffy, toothless gray tom basked in the glow of the lamp. Smiling, Archie got comfortable on his executive leather chair. One hand tickling the purring cat, the other on his mouse, he read his newest message.

Over a dozen pillars of society have quit their jobs to pursue their old dreams? Your Storybrooke is in crisis—like something out of a story :D. I look forward to you dishing the dirt on your town hall
I'm back, Archie typed. Storybrooke's own It's a Wonderful Life Mr. Potter took an astounding leap down his path to becoming a better person. Tonight, he gave a rousing speech about equity. I hope it inspires reforms in our local justice system.

Archie settled his chin on his palm and stared at the screen. In a couple of minutes he read:

Small towns are America in microcosm. You've found your life's mission. And Storybrooke is lucky you're there to help sort the opportunities from the dilemmas.

Archie sighed. Nobody could validate him like Vincent.

Feeling a vibration in his jacket pocket, he slipped out his phone. “Hello?”

“Doctor? Sorry I disturbed you. I'd thought this was your office number. I meant to leave a message.”

“Is—is this Mr. Gold?”

“Yes. I'd like to make an appointment... I need some... guidance... I received a text...”

Archie knew better than to ask from whom. Since Mr. Gold sounded disconcerted, not suicidal, he didn't want to start counseling on the phone. “My regular schedule is full tomorrow, but if you can get to my office at eight a.m., we can talk.”

“Yes. Thanks.” Mr. Gold sounded relieved. “Good night, doctor.”

Archie stared at the screen. Should I? He'd already told Vincent so much about his life. He just had to continue taking precautions: disguise identities, substitute earth versions for Enchanted Forest problems, and hold back the really bad stuff. It wasn't like his dear imaginary friend turned real friend would ever find his way to Storybrooke.

Archie returned his hands to his keyboard. You won't believe who just called for a session.

* * * * *

The moon had barely risen when Neal flew from the Fire Swamp camp up to the sky. Emma kept the car because it's where she met me. That thought sent him soaring higher and higher. When they were a pair of homeless teens living on impulse, they hadn't merely traveled from town to town in that old Volkswagen; they'd slept in it. In fact, more than likely, it was where they'd made Henry. And Emma kept driving that hot wired yellow bug around ever after. If that wasn't a sign she true love loved him, nothing was.

Now all he had to do was get off her son-of-a-bitch list.

Neal tilted to circle over the swamp cypress that ringed the camp. The first thing was to fly her and her mother back to their son. The second was to be someone she could be proud of by rescuing the lost Lost Boys. Neal's forehead knitted together. Their disappearances had coincided with Hook's reappearance in Neverland. If that cold-hearted pirate was involved, there was a good chance some or all of his friends were dead.

Suddenly, air rushed at his face. I'm falling!

At that realization, Neal plummeted faster. He flapped his arms, but that was pointless. Curl up, he
told himself, _tuck your head in, loop your hand over your neck, angle your shoulder down…_

Then he felt a tug on his coat collar. “Slow down, glamour boy,” Tinker Bell jingled as she swung him into a horizontal glide.

“Thanks!” —gasp— “Nearly screamed” —gasp— “acted a fool.”

“Calling on your friends is never foolish.” Tink paused. “What was that?”

The sound coming from one of the lean-tos below wasn't a scream. From this distance, Neal couldn't tell what it was. “Probably one of Aurora's nightmares. Let me down.”

This time Neal dropped at a safe speed controlled by his little fairy friend. A few inches from earth, Tink let go. He hit the ground jogging. Up ahead, he could make out Snow White ducking into the princess's lean-to with Emma trailing.

_Is Mulan on patrol?_ Neal wondered.

Nearing the lean-to, he heard the women arguing.

“No,” Snow whispered, “she's murmuring. I'm not waking her up unless I hear an honest-to-goodness whimper.”

“Mom—” Emma began.

“Yanking Aurora out of the sleeping curse netherworld won't yank Henry out of it too. It'll just stop her from hearing what he has to say.”

Emma didn't respond. When Neal crouched beside her, she turned her face to his. In the darkness, he couldn't read it. He reached out and laid his hand over hers.

Cocking his ear toward the sleeping beauty, Neal had to agree with Snow. Aurora didn't seem upset. “My guess is she's talking to Henry right now.”

Neal, Emma, and Snow leaned forward. Suddenly, he heard a scream—not from the sleeper but from outside the camp.

Emma yanked her hand away and sprang to her feet. “Mulan.”

Typical of the camp's only trained soldier, the scream didn't sound like a cry for help. To Neal it sounded like a call to battle.

* * * * *

Still sleepless at three in the morning, Mr. Gold dressed and drove to his shop. Long experience told him that when troubling thoughts kept him awake, the best relief was work. Smashing every breakable object in reach of his cane also brought welcome distraction, and such venting provided more antique repair projects to occupy his mind, but he had to admit that the cycle of destruction and restoration was a bit self-indulgent.

Thankfully tonight, a worthier task awaited him in his pawnshop. Not a simple job like reassembling a cracked vase or lacquering a damaged cabinet, but one that would require all his talents: bottling true love.

As he parked the Avalon Chauffeur Services Cadillac, he recalled the crafty old wizard who'd traded the formula for a lesson spinning straw into gold. Never had the Dark One made a better deal. In all
the universes—both the ones he'd visited via the Hatter Wizards' portal-hopping hat and the ones he'd only heard about—no magic held greater power than the purple passion potion he hoped to brew tonight.

Opening his door, Mr. Gold positioned his cane on the pavement, swiveled and stepped out with his good leg. He flinched when pain flared in his bad knee. Then he nodded. Before another night was over, Storybrooke would see rain. At the moment, the clouds scattered across the dark sky looked like lace. The moon, slightly deflated, shone through them beside the library clock tower.

*Belle's new home.* All the lights were off in both the public library downstairs and the private apartment upstairs—Belle observing her civic duty to conserve energy. When she had raised such issues in their time together, he'd always argued the opposite—anything to divert her from asking him questions. But still she had. When he'd interrogated Pinocchio, he'd accepted *decline to say* as an answer. Not Belle. In the end, his repeated silences had sent her packing. From the first night she was gone, he'd taken up stumbling around in the dark.

Sighing, Mr. Gold hobbled around the rear of the car, climbed the curb, and continued to his front door. The problem had been his promise to never lie. Following the incident with the wraith Belle had made him extend that promise to lies of misdirection as well. Keeping his word had reduced him to chitchat. After all, in his dealings with the rest of humanity, he relied on creating false impressions.

Unlocking his front door brought to mind the white-faced shock he'd given Pinocchio just the evening before. As he'd accepted his keys back, he'd said, *The matter at home took longer than I expected. Thanks for waiting around. As payment, you can have that item you've been ogling all afternoon.*

When *that item* had turned out to be a diamond ring, Mr. Gold hadn't batted an eye. The illusion he'd planted that he had supernatural awareness of any risk to himself or his possessions—even a footloose young man's momentary temptation—was invaluable. In reality, the only disturbance he could magically perceive in his environment was one caused by magic. For everyday threats, he depended on his ability to read people.

Not that it always held true. As with magic, the more personal the issue, the more likely his perception was to fail. Pinocchio had tricked him into believing he was Baelfire because the lie had fit his yearning. Regina had tricked him into believing he'd driven Belle to suicide because the lie had fit his fear.

Pressing his lips together, Mr. Gold opened the door, making his shop bell jingle. All in all, his temperament was better suited to the impersonal. *True love in a bottle*—that was something he could make work.

Mr. Gold locked the door behind him and crossed the floor, managing the familiar territory in the dark until he reached his front counter. Switching on the lamp, he examined the pile of properly labeled evidence bags holding single strands of hair. Charming hadn't wasted any time. By Mr. Gold's count, a dozen couples had donated. How many would testing prove to be truly in love?

If the usual odds held, less than half.

* * * * *

As Emma ran across the camp, she kept hearing Mulan shout. Though she couldn't make out any words, she realized that each outburst was accompanied by the clash of metal on metal. Her companion sounded like she was fighting for her life.
Better grab my own sword.

Emma zigzagged to her sleeping quarters while all around her the camp came noisily awake. Ducking through the curtain of vines, she grabbed the weapon Nibs had found to replace the one Curly had dropped down the cliff side. A lady sword he'd called it. The roses embossed on the hilt made it too girly for any Lost Boy to use, but the blade was sharp and true.

Twisting out of her lean-to into flickering light, Emma glanced up. The twins were zooming overhead with torches aflame and daggers outstretched. Worse than running with scissors. To be a good example, as she lit out in the direction of the clanging battle, she kept her sword in its scabbard.

Nearing Mulan, Emma began to hear the boys' cries as well. What were they facing? Hook and his crew? Ogres? Cora's zombies?

Emma rounded a massive swamp cypress on the edge of camp. In a small clearing on the far side, a single pair of duelists exchanged parries and thrusts: Mulan and a lanky, black-haired, black-mustached young man.

What in the hell?

Relieved to see just one intruder, Emma stopped to catch her breath.

Nearly a dozen torches shone down on the sword-fighters. The hovering Lost Boys holding them aloft yelled out advice and encouragement. Emma was perturbed to realize not all of it was directed at Mulan. Evidently, the boys had decided it would be more fun to not all root for the same side.

But Mulan's definitely winning, Emma thought. The stranger hopped nimbly from boulder to grass tussock to rotting stump in a flashy manner that had his supporters cheering, but his energy was mostly showmanship. Her comrade-in-arms kept her movements economical, waiting until her opponent chanced within range before she shrieked and lunged. When Mulan's sword made contact with his leather jerkin, his aim wavered, and he stumbled backwards. Again, her friend charged with a mighty scream, this time slashing his sleeve.

“Why on earth is she making that racket?” Emma muttered.

Mary-Margaret came alongside her, bow and quiver slung across her back. “A shout gives Mulan a strong exhalation on the hit. That increases her focus and intensifies the force of her blow.”

“Seriously?” I'm going to have to remember that.

“Plus,” her Mom added, “a woman screeching really freaks a guy out.”

The duelists began deflecting each other's strikes at lightning speed. Then the stranger feinted to the left, circled Mulan's blade with his and tapped her gauntlet. She crossed his sword with hers, but he pushed her back. His fans went wild, and he gave a little bow. Then Mulan shot one leg forward and one backward like a gymnast doing the splits. With a roar, she brought her sword up under his wrist guard. Fumbling, he barely held onto his hilt.

Neal dashed up brandishing an unsheathed cutlass. Emma scowled. I'll need to talk to him about blades and safety later.

“Is Mulan in trouble?” he asked. “Does she need help?”

Placing her hands on her hips, Emma widened her eyes. “You think an experienced soldier can't best a lone swordsman just because she's a woman?” She waited until she saw a flustered why do I
always put my foot in my mouth look on Neal's face before giving him a chummy punch on the arm. “Don't worry. She's fine. The screams are part of her technique.”

Emma, flanked by Neal and Snow, watched the pair dance with each other, blades clanging. With a shriek, Mulan swung around and took a swipe at her opponent. This time she drew blood.

Emma winced. “I'm more worried for whoever that guy is she's dueling.”

Chapter End Notes

Archie Hopper's dear curse-implanted "friend from university" was mentioned way back in chapter 9. Hope that wasn't too long a break before bringing him into the story.
Have You Ever Had a Hamburger?

Chapter Summary

An all-the-feels chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin) to Belle: You must leave because, despite what you hope, I'm still a monster (Broken).

An hour before sunrise, Charming pulled up at the side of Mr. Gold, Pawnbroker and Antiquities Dealer and drew his gun. When Belle had called about seeing a light that hadn't been on earlier, he'd rolled his eyes but dragged himself from bed to take a look. He'd felt the likelihood was slim that any Storybrooke citizen would risk death—or worse—from whatever protective curses the wizard was rumored to have cast on his shop. But investigating 911's was his job.

Then, on drive-by, Charming had seen a spooky purple light seeping out the gaps in the blinds on the side door. That had put a whole different spin on the matter. Whoever had broken in was wielding magic—maybe that evil sorceress Cora that Henry's netherworld friend had warned him about just a few hours before. She was trying to reach Storybrooke. Perhaps she'd succeeded.

Charming approached the eerily glowing door by sidling along the wooden wall—something he'd seen earlier that evening on a cop reality show. If the perpetrator had magic, then his best bet was the element of surprise. He stopped, raised his leg, and aimed his boot heel just below the knob. One, two, three, kick!

The frame splintered, and the door slammed against the inside wall. Charming darted inside, aiming his Berretta with both hands. Across the room, he saw Rumplestiltskin seated at his work table, illuminated by a ball of fire poised to be thrown.

For a moment, they stared at each other. Then Charming saw the shock on Rumplestiltskin's face relax into a sardonic grin.

"Please don't shoot, dearie. I can't be harmed, but I'd hate to ruin another suit."

I wish he'd stop calling me dearie. When the wizard snuffed out his fireball, Charming lowered his pistol. "Uh, someone called in they'd seen a suspicious light. Then when I noticed the purple glow…” Whatever was making it was shinning up at Rumplestiltskin from his work table, creating ridges and shadows on his face like an imp's mask.

"True love does look rather fiendish when it's put on display,” the wizard said.

So that's what that is, Charming thought. Purple passion potion.

He swung the cracked door shut as best he could. Stepping closer to Rumplestiltskin, he ran his eyes over the collection of bottles standing on the work table. A dark brown sludge filled six of them. Two others contained gray goo that occasionally shimmered as silver fibers snaked through. The final four glowed purple. Any doubt he was viewing magic was dispelled by the pairs of golden
fibers dancing inside each vial.

“That’s all twelve,” Charming said. “You mean half the matches were duds?”

“They’re your friends,” Rumplestiltskin began pointing out purple bottles. “Abigail and Frederick, Rapunzel and Flynn, Ivan and Helene—all positive. By accident, I mixed up two of the other couples, but it turned out that the wife of one is positive for the husband of the other.”

Charming grimaced. “I don’t need to know.”

“This result counts as positive but too weak to be of any use,” Rumplestiltskin held up a gray bottle. “Ella and Thomas.”

Charming groaned. “Please stop identifying them.”

Rumplestiltskin leaned back. “You really shouldn’t have limited yourself to royals. They like to claim all the happily-ever-afters, but occasionally commoners find true love as well.”

“Point taken.” Charming felt a vibration in his breast pocket and slipped out his cell phone. “Hello?”

“Was there a break-in? Was anything stolen?”

“Ah, Belle.” Charming rubbed the back of his neck. “It turns out Gold was working late. On some magic for me, actually. Want to talk to him?” He looked up to see Rumplestiltskin frantically waving his hands for no. “Uh, he doesn’t—” As that word left his mouth, the wizard’s expression became even more anxious, and his gesture changed to a hasty summons. “Just a moment.”

Rumplestiltskin swallowed noticeably before taking the phone. “Hello?”

In the next instant, the harsh lines in his face vanished. He closed his eyes, cradled the phone to his ear and hugged an arm across his chest. “Yes… I… I couldn’t sleep… Chamomile and lavender… I tried that… What magic? Nothing to be concerned about. Just a little something to power a portal to reach Emma and Mary-Margaret… Yes… I know… Act in haste, repent at leisure…” His lips relaxed into a smile. “You needn’t remind me…”

The way Rumplestiltskin was practically melting into the phone was indecent. Charming quirked his mouth and turned aside. He walked along the shelves, reading the titles of the magic books that weren’t written in obscure runes. He stopped to study a collection of wooden beetles—so accurately detailed, they looked like they’d once been alive. Then he noticed a glow at the end of the row. More true love potion?

Reaching it, he moved a heavy volume to reveal a cut crystal bottle with a filigreed gold stopper sitting on a filigreed gold stand. This potion radiated a purple light twice the intensity of the bottles on the work table. The golden fibers inside twisted and twirled, creating rainbow bubbles that effervesced upward, exploding into sparks when they reached the top. Overall, this example looked more like the vial the Dark One had made him hide in Dragon Maleficent way back when—like the one he said was powering all the magic in Storybrooke now: my family’s true love.

Charming looked over his shoulder at Rumplestiltskin, still engrossed in his call. His eyes shut, the man continued to smile, but he’d wrinkled his forehead again. “The concert… You know it’s not easy for me… People are more comfortable if I—I—I know. I need to make an effort… yes… of course, I want to hear you sing… yes… I… I… hamburgers.”

Charming sucked on his cheek until the last gentle farewell had left the wizard’s mouth. Taking his phone back by two fingers, he stuck it in his pocket. Then he pointed at the purple bottle on the shelf.
“That batch looks potent.”

Rumplestiltskin’s lips twisted in one of his I’m-not-telling smiles.

Charming folded his arms. “I’m thinking about my wife and daughter. Considering their dilemma is your fault, it’s not fair to hoard magic that could bring them back.”

Rumplestiltskin drew a deep breath and released it again. “As lovely as that potion is, I have qualms about its viability.”

Cocking his head, Charming asked, “Seriously? The way that potion is burning, it looks like its creators slew each other a couple of dragons, yet you’re worried their love isn’t true?”

“Well, not dragons. Their sacrifices are of a different sort.” Rumplestiltskin’s eyes took on the faraway look they’d had the first time he’d told Charming about true love magic—long, long ago, lost in the Infinite Forest. “The woman in question is sacrificing her happiness by trying to get back with the man. He is sacrificing his by trying to stay apart. A rather precarious arrangement, wouldn’t you say?”

Cripes. I walked right into that one. He means him and Belle.

Putting on his best show of nonchalance, Charming slid the large book back in front of the bottle. “So… four collected, five needed. I’ll get you more samples as soon as I can. And this time please don’t tell me which result is whose.” He turned to leave then stopped when he saw—really saw—the busted door. “You have some abracadabra to fix that, don’t you?”

Rumplestiltskin lifted his eyebrows. “As easy as mending my cane, dearie.”

A minute past eight a.m., Archie settled down on his leather chair and rested his hands on his knees, trying to look as tranquil as possible. Mr. Gold had distanced himself on the couch at the far end of the long coffee table—the same as his two previous sessions. Six months had passed between his need to talk about his son and his need to talk about his magic. This time the break had been less than a week. The issue must be pressing. In Archie’s experience, that meant his client would take longer to begin.

When Mr. Gold gnawed his lip a full minute without speaking, Archie offered a prompt. “You mentioned a text?”

“The text, yeah. The text. Indeed, the situation has gone far beyond the text.” Mr. Gold tapped his cane nervously on the floor. “Belle called. We talked. We have a date.” He shuddered. “I would have gone to hear her sing at the concert tonight anyway. Now I’ll be strolling around the booths afterwards as well. Belle’s made so many friends in the last few weeks. Everybody knows her. Everybody likes her. And there she’ll be—with me.”

Belle French, the new librarian. The thought of the cheerful, vivacious, young woman made Archie smile. In two short weeks, her enthusiasm had turned the town library around with book clubs, poetry readings, and children’s story hour. Then he frowned, trying to recall the rumors about her relationship with Mr. Gold. That part was a mystery. He didn’t remember anyone saying they’d ever seen her with him.

“When you two were together—living together—you must have gone out at least—at least once.”

“In Belle’s dreams, maybe.” Mr. Gold raised his shoulders. “Oh, we took long walks. And drives. But it’s not as though we ever went out for Storybrooke’s limited night life. Not even the diner. Too awkward. Ruby is civil to me, but Granny would rather I wither and die. Yet tonight Belle wants us
to eat at Granny's hamburger concession.”

“Hamburgers. That sounds… non-threatening.”

“In the midst of a crowd?” Mr. Gold rocked his head from side to side as if trying to work out an unbearable kink. “Of the many magical objects I relied on in the Enchanted Forest, why is my cloak the one item that wretched curse left behind?”

“Your—your cloak? A magical cloak? What did it do?”

“It protected me.”

“Protected you. Protected you from what?”

“From being noticed.”

Archie released his breath in a long “Oh.” He fumbled for his glasses, removed them, and polished them on his shirt. Once again, Mr. Gold had him stuck for a reply.

“When the hood was up, I could pass through throngs without people being aware I was there. They'd make way, but they wouldn't realize why. I could see everything as it happened without the bother.” Mr. Gold grimaced. “No such luck tonight. At least Belle won't be asking me difficult questions. We'll be too distracted by the entire town of Storybrooke coming and going around us—wondering what Beauty is doing, sharing hamburgers with the Beast.”

*Beauty and the Beast.* Archie peered curiously at Mr. Gold. “You didn't—didn't pick that fairy tale at random, did you? That's your story. Yours and Belle's.”

A faint smile rose to Mr. Gold's lips. “When you've been around three hundred years, you acquire some history.”

“Why, that's fantastic. Really fantastic, isn't it?” Archie returned his glasses to his nose to take a good look at his client. “That's—that's one of my favorites. We're talking the version where Beauty is adventurous, bright, well-read. And the Beast is—is under a curse that makes him not quite—not quite—”

“Human?” Mr. Gold jiggled his head, apparently not offended. “Though the animal I resembled was more crocodile than lion.”

“Quite.” Bemused, Archie propped his chin on his hand. “And the castle. I was in awe of your lovely castle. What I—I saw of it. But I don't—don't recall you having any—any anthropomorphic furniture.”

Mr. Gold chuckled softly. These recollections seemed to have relaxed him. “I had a dog-faced puppet I charmed to play cards, but otherwise, no. The animated version is wrong. My chipped cup is really a cup.”

Archie smiled. “If you're the Beast, then you're the hero of the story.”

Mr. Gold's mouth twitched. He shook his head. “Belle was the hero—of more consequence than in the earth version. She agreed to come to my castle in exchange for me saving her town from ogres.” He fidgeted with his cane. “But she doesn't know the devious step I took to make sure that was the only deal on the table. My part in the story was anything but heroic.”

A change in Mr. Gold's voice told Archie they'd come to the crux of his visit. He sat still, waiting for
That morning in the Fire Swamp Camp, everyone who had avidly watched the duel—with running commentary, cheers, and shouts of guidance—sat very still. When they'd given up on rescuing the mysterious swordsman, everyone had assured each other his disappearance down a pit of lightning sand was really nobody's fault. They'd stuck the longest sticks they could find as far as they could into the treacherous depths. No luck. With nothing more to be done, they'd agreed that the only thing to do was get some sleep.

Huddled around the breakfast campfire, Emma saw yawning mouths and bloodshot eyes. Everyone looked like their night's rest has been as fitful as her own. When the only recourse was speculating on what one should have done, sleep was impossible. *I'm supposed to be the responsible one. Why didn't I stop the fight?*

No one looked more mournful than Mulan's. The usually unflappable soldier seemed as disconsolate as an abandoned child. After all, the stranger had tripped into the lightning sand when he'd thrown down his sword and pushed her out of the way of a fire spout. In saving her life, he'd lost his own.

“Good morning, everyone. Have I got news for—”

Emma glanced over at Aurora. For the first time in weeks, the princess had slept soundly—right through the noisy duel. Now she was staring around her group of friends with her eyebrows raised. Emma swallowed hard and stood up. She would have to be the one to tell the tale, so Aurora wouldn't pester Mulan.

Shaking her head vigorously to clear it, Emma started toward the princess. “We're all okay. It's just that—well, long story.”

Aurora didn't respond. She was gazing open-mouthed at something behind Emma.

*What in the world?* she turned.

The stranger from the night before was standing there—sand crusted in his long, wavy, black hair and in his full, black mustache as well. The way his dark eyes glanced this way and that betrayed nervousness, but his jaw jutted out and his stance was straight and tall.

“I am Inigo Domingo Santiago de Todos Montoya the Fourth. Do any of you fine people know the way out of the Fire Swamp?”

At the not-dead swordsman's words, Nibs let out a whoop. Curly and Freebird jumped up and down. Other Lost Boys clapped excitedly. Emma clasped her arms across her stomach, trying to keep her knees from buckling with the weakness of relief. Glancing around at her companions, she started laughing. Surprising how believing you'd negligently killed a stranger—then finding you hadn't—suddenly made him your dearest, long-lost friend.

Then Mulan gave Emma the biggest surprise of all. Her stern, no-nonsense, soldierly companion shrieked—but this time with tears streaming down her cheeks. She launched herself running at her erstwhile opponent and wrapped her arms around him. “You're alive!”

With a bewildered grin, Inigo hugged her back.

Archie continued to sit very still while Mr. Gold stared unfocused at a spot just past his right ear. Apparently, whatever he was seeing helped his words flow. He hadn't required so much as an
encouraging *mm-hmm* during his entire story.

“That was the first time I saw Belle. What I watched her do for that old woman was so incredibly kind, I felt my heart melting.” Mr. Gold breathed a heavy sigh. “That's when I knew I had to forget her. Once before, a woman had diverted me from my mission to find my son—the same woman I'd built my castle for. I couldn't risk being tricked again.”

Hearing a rasp in his client's voice, Archie leaned out to pour a glass of water from the pitcher he kept filled for that purpose.

Mr. Gold waved his hand for *don't trouble yourself* and cleared his throat. “I tried my usual distractions: study, travel, experimenting with new forms of magic. I spun gold for days and nights at a time. Finally, I decided my image of her was so noble, it couldn't be real—that seeing her again would dispel my delusions, so I devised a circumstance where I could speak to her—and found she was more splendid than I remembered.” He clasped and unclasped the handle of his cane. “Seeing her twice, I wanted to see her always.”

Listening, Archie felt a catch in his throat. He reached for the water pitcher and filled himself a glass.

“I had no illusions about the Dark One courting her. I resolved that she would be my housekeeper. To make that deal I knew what I offered had to be something she and her father couldn't afford to reject.”

“Your ability to negotiate with ogres,” Archie said.

Mr. Gold nodded. “By then, the Ogre Truces had been in place so long that no living man remembered the horrors of fighting them. I decided to provide a reminder.” He passed a hand across his eyes. “So when it came time to hold my yearly parley for the realm where Belle lived, I was tardy.”

Confused, Archie frowned. “Tardy?” Why would something that would earn a schoolchild a demerit in citizenship so distress his client that he looked like, at any moment, his face would crumple?

“You don't understand.” Mr. Gold clenched his cane. “In order to inflate my fee, to extort what I wanted, I concocted a swindle worthy of the Duke of the Frontlands. Willfully, with cold-blooded calculation—knowing full well how the ogres would interpret my absence—I didn't show up to renew the truce. And because I was tardy, the town up the river, sister city to Belle's—the town of Avonlea—fell. A messenger took the news to her father Maurice. Immediately after, I appeared in his castle. Bursting with confidence, I said, 'My price is her.' And because of the peril in which I'd placed her town, she agreed. I engineered the slaughter of six-hundred-and-ninety-two of her neighbors… all because I fancied Belle serving my tea.”

Archie felt numb. The psychology education and clinical training the curse had implanted had not prepared him for a confession like this. “That's—that's—that's a lot to live with.”

As soon as the ridiculous palliative left his mouth, he wanted to bang his head with his umbrella. Mr. Gold was staring at him. Archie swallowed hard. Suddenly, he realized the best approach was not to be reassuring but to be brutally honest. “That's—that's horrifying. I'm appalled. You crafted an—an awful deal, made a really—really dreadful choice. But you know that. Why? Why did you?”

Spreading his hands in an elaborate *it's a mystery* shrug, Mr. Gold released a long, breathy laugh. “At the time it seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do.”

Studying Mr. Gold, Archie recalled their discussion of the Dark One curse. It took a person's
tendencies and made them extreme. “You—you haven’t told Belle.”

“Of course, I haven’t told Belle. But she knows I’m holding onto some dark secret. A week before she left, she asked why out of nearly two-hundred-and-fifty years of satisfactory negotiations all over the Enchanted Forest, Avonlea was the exception.” Mr. Gold sucked air through his teeth. “Belle made me promise to never lie to her—not even mislead. And I keep my word, so when she asks me a question like that, all I can give her is silence.”

Archie heard the soft ping of the alarm he’d set on his phone to tell him when a session’s fifty minutes were up. He ignored it and took a long sip of water.

“She asked if I knew what happened to her betrothed, Gaston. I was silent. She asked how I lost my son, my wife. Silent again. She asked what my past is with Regina that she would want to harm my true love.” Mr. Gold shook his head. “Finally, she asked why I brought magic to Storybrooke, why I need the power. I could have told her that magic is my most cherished skill, that I’m proud of it the way I’m proud of any accomplishment. But for Belle, a partial truth is as good as a lie. The full answer to her question involves three centuries of experiences too humiliating or too disgraceful or too dark to talk about. When I remained silent, she left.”

“You could live with that—separation from the one you love—because it’s less painful.” Archie centered his gaze on his client. “But Belle couldn’t. She contacted you. She must be expecting something to be different.”

Mr. Gold laid his cane across his lap. “Absurd, really. She apologized. She said she’s been judgmental, that she’s sorry for making me afraid to speak. She promised I can tell her anything, that it won’t make her love me less, it’ll only help her understand me more.”

Archie tilted his head. True love. That might be the best description he’d heard yet.

“Belle didn’t know what she was saying.” Mr. Gold closed his eyes a moment. “She said we can be together if I open up and let her in. But she doesn’t understand what a dark, loathsome place that is.”

Oh. Archie laced his fingers, once more at a loss for what to say.

Unexpectedly, Mr. Gold laughed. “What an ironic deal! The thing she requires in exchange for her love—openness—is the same thing that would destroy it.”

“Not everything is a… a deal.”

“Isn’t it?” He hung his head. “What happens if I don’t open up about Avonlea? She's gone again. What happens if I do? Something even worse. She'll recognize that the man she thinks she loves never existed.”

“That's what you believe—”

“That's what I've experienced. A long time ago, before I was the Dark One, Bae's mother became disillusioned with me. When that happened, she didn't merely stop loving me. She realized she'd never loved me.”

Archie heard the double ping that told him his next client was due. Since that next client was Regina, he needed to reach some semblance of equilibrium with Mr. Gold as quickly as possible.

“You called Belle your true love. True love is forever. This world's psychology texts don't recognize the concept, but we both know it's real. If your story is Beauty and the Beast, then you must have some evidence. Was there a kiss, and was it—?”
“Magical? Indeed. The physical manifestations of the Dark One began to fade—the lizard skin, the talons, the odd voice. But the paranoia remained.” Mr. Gold cringed. “I yelled in Belle's face. The very fact that she said it was true love was my proof she was out to trick me. I accused her of conspiring with Regina to strip me of my power, so I could be killed. I had dared to believe she could tolerate me; I was too afraid to believe she could love me, so I threw her out. When she was alone in the forest, unprotected, Regina took her prisoner. We didn't see each other for thirty years.”

“That—that was a tragedy. Both of you have survived countless—countless trials and tragedies.”

Mr. Gold exhaled a long, ragged sigh.

“And tonight you'll be sharing hamburgers.” Archie smiled. “If that's not a fairy tale ending, what is?”

Mr. Gold blinked. He stared at Archie. Then he started to chuckle. “Oh my, doctor. For a moment, I'd forgotten. Hamburgers. Tonight. With Belle.” Despite everything he'd said, a smile stretched his lips that reminded Archie of a schoolboy's. “What on earth will we talk about? Condiments?”

“Oh,” Archie said, rising to his feet and walking toward his backdoor, away from where Regina would soon enter. “I'm sure you'll think of something more meaningful than that.”

Chapter End Notes

I wish the show had included more scenes of Dr. Hopper counseling some of Storybrooke's very troubled citizens. The fact that Rumple and Belle thought of asking him to preside over their wedding (presumably, he got "ordained" for the purpose) suggests they liked and trusted him.

Please note: if you'd like to see the graphics for this chapter and previous chapters, go to Wattpad and click on this story under this same nom (and vote for the chapters!) or look me up on Tumblr.

Next chapter coming Monday, 2/11/19.
I've Never Forgotten

Chapter Summary

Smee listens to the box.
Emma and company listen to Inigo.
Mr. Gold listens to his music box.
Grumpy listens to Belle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin): “Just taking inventory.” (Heart of Darkness)

Smee stared at the biscuit tin. One more job and I'm free? The unexpected prospect of being his own man again hit him like the first few chugs on a bottle of Cisco. He felt positively bouncy. Grinning into the white light beaming from under the open lid, he said, “You're the boss.”

“First, you need to take care of the fairy dust. The dwarves hit a deposit two days ago. The first bag they filled is sitting unguarded just past the mine entrance. Bring a wheel barrel. Stow the bag under the old toll bridge.”

Jack a gardener's truck. “Check.”

“Second, show up for work, so Moe won't cause a scene if he sees you at the Storybrooke Concert for the Kids tonight.”

The what concert? “Check.” The damn tin would probably make him spring for his own ticket.

“Third, go to the concert. There will be a hard-to-find object there you'll be asked to acquire.” With that, the rusty box snapped shut.

Detailed instructions later. Smee rolled his eyes. “Check.”

He hoped the tin would provide the full scoop when he returned to his flat this evening to change his Game of Thrones uniform for street clothes. Otherwise, he'd have to lug the nasty thing around all night.

Inigo's smile brightened. "So, you've visited Florin? Does that mean you can point me in the direction of home?"

Neal frowned. “I've never actually seen it.” Except in a movie, and I'm pretty sure that was actually the coast of Ireland.

Sitting on the log across from Neal, Snow cocked her head. “As I recall… you need to get back to help your friends…Westley, Buttercup, and Fezzick.”

“Yes. That's right.” Emma brushed back a tangle of blonde hair. “And defeat Prince Humperdinck.”
So...Emma enjoys old movies, too. Neal rubbed his forehead, scavenging for some trivia to impress her. “And avenge your father. By dueling the six-fingered man. But only after Miracle Max and Valerie bring Westley back from near death.”

Inigo's smile twisted into friendly perplexity. “That's not my story, but it is my great-grandfather's. How can you know it in a land I've never heard of when none of you have ever been to my land?”

Aurora flicked her eyes upward then shrugged. “It's because of the other land where these three have lived. Earth. That place is so fantastical, you'll think I'm making up a story. Nobody there can wield magic, yet nearly everybody is connected to spiritus mundi. Because of this, they know events from many universes. The only reason they don't make better use of their knowledge is the widespread delusion it's just their imagination.”

“Wow,” Snow said. “You nailed it.”

Retreating into princess-like modesty, Aurora folded her hands in her lap. “After you explained it half a dozen times.”

Returning his attention to Inigo, Neal caught him watching Mulan. What else would one expect from the beneficiary of a pretty woman's tears? He darted a glance at Emma.

When Mulan spoke up, her voice was matter-of-fact—as if her outburst of emotion had never happened. “What you must take into account is that earth people distrust their knowledge, so like common gossips, they distort it to fit their own experiences. Just when you think their information is so accurate, it's prophetic, you learn they have it all wrong.”

“Interesting.” Inigo ran his finger across his thick mustache as his dark eyes swept the circle of bleary-eyed grownups and drowsy Lost Boys. “Do any of you know my story?”

Neal saw Emma and Snow shake their heads. Turning back to the great-grandson of the Inigo Montoya of late-night television, he said, “Not until you tell us.”

When Mr. Gold entered his pawnshop after talking to Dr. Hopper, he left the “Closed” side of his little sign facing out. Today—thankfully—was his last day inventorying the Enchanted Forest knickknacks the universe-ripping curse had deposited in his shop. That the rest of Storybrooke held him responsible was annoying. Most of the bric-a-brac held value only for their owners. How could anyone think he wanted them? But all of the items were talismans. He understood the anxiety to have them back.

That's what he'd felt the evening Emma's arrival in Storybrooke had awakened his memories. Late into the night, he'd ransacked his shop, searching for the teacup Belle had chipped and the homespun shawl Baelfire had left behind. None of the thousand other possessions he'd identified since held the same power for him, but after a life of loss, he was reluctant to part with any of them.

Like my music box. Spying it where he'd left it by his cash register, Mr. Gold hobbled across his floor, hooked his cane on the edge of the counter, and raised the lid. As Geppetto had promised, it sang like the angels—that is, if the angels had wanted to sing Froggie Went A-Courtin'.

The recollections the tinkling notes stirred were so bittersweet that Mr. Gold felt his lips curve and his throat constrict at the same time. When Bae was a lad, he'd sung the nursery rhyme while he did his chores. Hearing the melody two centuries later, the Dark One had chosen the music box as his price for striking one of the countless ogre truces. That the arrogant, tyrannical, cheating royal he'd done the deal for had held the box dear, well, that had made its acquisition all the sweeter.
As he began filing the chits Pinocchio had collected the day before, Mr. Gold felt the child's tune lightening his mood. Why shouldn't I feel less unhappy? Spending an evening with Belle—just friends—seemed not quite so daunting. Conjuring a portal to reach Emma and Snow was no longer a hopeless proposition. And if he could meet those challenges, surely, he could work out the magic to preserve his Enchanted Forest memories beyond Storybrooke's border. And once he did that, he could look for his son.

“I will find him,” he whispered.

Hadn't the seer foretold as much? For a quarter of a millennium he'd struggled to understand her prophecy, yet how it would be fulfilled remained a puzzle. Was his boy in stasis, waiting to be reanimated like Pinocchio? Under a sleeping curse like young Henry had been, needing a parent's loving kiss to rouse him? Or had Reul Gorm's cruel vortex ripped through time as well as space? When he located the spot where her portal opened into this world, would Bae fall from the Enchanted Forest, straight into his papa's arms?

As Mr. Gold's musings went 'round and 'round, the song played slower and slower until at last it stopped. Lifting the music box to rewind it, he saw a jeweler's envelope attached to the underside. Geppetto had used blue painter's tape. How thoughtful. He didn't want to damage the gold leaf.

Mr. Gold smiled. Gently, he freed the envelope and unsealed it. The note inside read, “Found this wrapped around a gear.” Curious, he tipped the envelope upside down. Out fell a thin silver chain and a hunk of rose quartz.

A chill ran through Mr. Gold. Cora's necklace—payment for his first night spinning straw into gold. After all these years, seeing it again felt like a bad omen. Never since had a deal been such a mistake. He hesitated, then extended a finger to stroke the stone. Jagged on one side and curved on the other, the shard had once been half of a heart pendant.

Mr. Gold pressed his eyes shut a moment. Then he swept the remains of the necklace back into the envelope, placed it in the music box, and closed the lid.

Inigo sprang to his feet. “No Montoya has ever been the Dread Pirate Roberts. You take that back.”

“But, but—” Neal stuttered then realized he had to change direction. Inigo would hardly accept But he was at the end of the movie. “Hollywood, uh, Earth has it wrong.” Again. “I meant no disrespect. Whoever Dread Pirate Roberts was a few generations back, the current one is your enemy. I get that. You say he kidnapped your brothers?”

Inigo's indignation disintegrated into misery. “Tomas and Julio. Eleven and nine. The dearest, most innocent of lads. Our parents are dead. I am their guardian. I failed them.” He sank back down on his log seat. “When that blackguard came for the sword he'd commissioned, I left him in my shop to retrieve it from my smithy. By the time I returned, he'd absconded with my brothers. After six long weeks, I cornered him in a brothel, but his crew chased me into the Fire Swamp.”

Neal didn't know what to say. Shanghaiing men to be sailors was not unusual for a pirate, but abducting children sounded suspiciously like Captain Hook. He glanced at his young friends, dozing around the campfire. Today he'd learned that Florin wasn't just an earth story from The Princess Bride and that it connected to the Enchanted Forest through the uncharted Fire Swamp. Could Florin connect to Neverland by sea?

“This particular Dread Pirate Roberts,” Neal ventured, “what does he look like?”
“About your height, tanned, muscular, black-haired.” Inigo’s eyebrows drew together.

“And his left hand?” If he has one.

Inigo rubbed his mustache. “He always wore gloves, so I never saw it. I never saw his face either. He wore a scarf over his head with holes for his eyes. He and all who held the name before him—as far as I know—have done the same.”

Neal glanced toward the women. “Hiding his left hand. Could he be—?”

“I never saw Hook in a mask,” Emma said, “but he is buff.” Leaning toward her mother, she started whispering.

Just how well does she know him? Straining his ears, Neal made out, “Henry’s fine…” “Charming’s looking after…” “If Hook’s involved…” “Needed here…” “Cora…”

After a full minute, Snow lifted her chin. “We've agreed. Now that we know our family in Storybrooke is safe, we want to stay and help.”

“But what about getting back to Henry?” Neal asked. “Aurora told us that any day now, Mr. Gold—”

“Hah! What's his price to take us home?” Emma blew a raspberry worthy of a New York cabbie. “I wouldn't trust any deal that two-faced—”

Abruptly, Snow clutched her daughter's shoulder. “There, there. Let's not bore everyone—not when we have duck eggs to scramble. Who's hungry?”

Snow said the last word so loudly she woke the Lost Boys. Before Neal could say anything more, the circle around the smoldering campfire exploded into a debate about whether to reheat their half-eaten breakfast or cook a fresh lunch.

As Neal rose to fetch more wood, Emma's interrupted tirade tickled his thoughts. What was that she'd said about a deal?

Midday, Belle stood on tiptoes near the top of a wooden ladder on the playhouse stage. One hand gripped a rung while the other lifted the end of an orange banner proclaiming “Storybrooke Concert for the Kids.” Her precarious perch brought to mind Rumple’s castle—the time she'd wrestled with his heavy, musty, brocade curtains, trying to tug them apart to let in the sun.

No jerky movements! she told herself. If she toppled now, Rumple wasn't waiting below to catch her in his arms.

Belle glanced sidelong to the far side of the stage. Her old confidant Leroy was sitting atop a second ladder, hoisting the banner’s other end. The dopey grin carving dimples in his bearded cheeks belied his Enchanted Forest name. Instead of Grumpy, he looked like the name by which she'd first known him: Dreamy.

I know why he's so starry-eyed. Slowly, Belle peered over her shoulder at the gawky, sweet-faced nun standing in the center aisle calling out, “A little to the left. No. A little to the right.”

She's not really a nun, Belle reminded herself. She's the novice fairy who invited him to see the fireflies.
Belle watched Astrid’s wide, doe brown eyes sweep across the banner. Then she broke into a smile and announced, “Perfect.” Leroy sighed.

*Finally.* Picking up her hammer, Belle positioned her nail and gave it a whack.

Relieved to be done, she began climbing down. *At least in this world I can work in jeans.* Safely at ground level, she looked to Leroy. He remained motionless, gazing at his once-upon-a-time sweetheart. Suddenly, he looked embarrassed and twisted to hammer in his end of the banner. His ladder wobbled.

*If he’s not careful, he’s going to fall. I doubt Astrid and I can catch him.*

Belle recalled the old-world tavern where she’d met Dreamy. There she’d sat, clutching a handful of coins—meager earnings from selling the necklace she’d worn the day she’d accompanied Rumplestiltskin out of her father’s castle, the same necklace she’d worn when he’d told her, *I don’t want you anymore, dearie,* and kicked her out. On the table before her had stood a tankard of rum, her first hard liquor ever. Trying to muster the courage to get sodding, pie-eyed drunk, she’d welcomed the distraction of eavesdropping on the miners at the next table. When the older one had advised, *Dwarfs can’t fall in love,* she’d looked Dreamy straight in the eye and told him, *Trust me. I know love, and you’re in it.*

As Belle watched Leroy shamble down his ladder she thought, *He still is.* And yet he’d pulled away from his true love. *Just like I did from mine.*

Astrid spread out her arms. “The booths, the bunting, and now the banner: you made it happen, Leroy. How can I thank you?”

“I had help,” he mumbled, favoring her with a smile that made Belle think his name should have been Bashful. “Glad it’ll be a clear night. You’ll be raking in the cash. For the orphans’ home. At the ticket booth. I mean—”

“This time I just signed up for the prep work.” Astrid paused, blinked, then took a step toward Leroy. “I thought it might be nice to actually go to an event for once.”

“Oh.” He stared at her.

*Make your move,* Belle urged silently.

Instead, Leroy about-faced and hurried away. Raising his hammer, he mumbled, “Enjoy yourself.”

Belle saw the former fairy’s shoulders droop. *Leroy, you fool!* Hurrying across the stage, she caught her friend as he entered the wings.

Back in the Enchanted Forest tavern, Belle had rhapsodized to Dreamy about love: *It's the most wonderful and amazing thing in the world. Love is hope. It fuels our dreams. And if you're in it, you need to enjoy it.* Now all she could say as she fell into step was, “You chickened out! What's wrong with you?”

“We had our chance—a long time ago.” Leroy hung his head. “Love doesn't always last forever.”

Belle grimaced. *I did say that, didn't I?* She drew a deep breath. “Since then, I've learned a little more. Sometimes—despite all hardships, against all odds, even contrary to common sense—love survives.”

Leroy released a snuffle. “Really? You don't think it's too late?”
Belle started to say *Trust me*, then bit her lip. “I've realized I'm not the expert I thought I was. But there's one thing I'm sure of: the biggest regret would be not trying.”

My links:

- Wattpad: Debrah Clachair (same story but with graphics)
- Tumblr: The Wizard of Grouch (same graphics plus a lot of other people's gifs--but I'm going to learn how to make these this week)
- Twitter: DebrahClachair@DebrahClachair
- Pinterest: Debrah Clachair

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 25--the quarter mark--will be posted on Wednesday (2/13/19). Thanks for reading this far. What do you think about Mr. Smee? He's rather fun to write.
Then Something Changed My Mind

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold makes a potion.
Vincent makes a call.
Smee makes the rounds.
Belle makes a move.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Regina/The Evil Queen to Belle:** Besides, if he loves you, he would've let you go (*Skin Deep*).

Late that afternoon, sitting at his back-office desk, Mr. Gold correlated the last rightful owner claim with his newly completed inventory. Why the former firebird wanted his gilded cage was a mystery. But whatever the reason, Mr. Gold now knew its exact location.

Mr. Gold looked across the room. According to the grandfather clock that Jaq Franklin would reclaim on Monday, the time was 5:03 p.m. The pregnant EMT—Myrtle something—was three minutes late. Well, he had no time to wait around—not with so much to get ready for tonight.

Just as he was reaching for his cane, Mr. Gold heard his shop bell jingle. Finally. “I'm at the back,” he called out. He drummed his fingers on his desk as rubber-soled shoes scuffed across his showroom floor. When the old woman poked her head through the curtains cloaking the entrance to his office, Mr. Gold arranged his face into a pleasant smile. “I have what you came for.” He nodded toward a vial of emerald green liquid standing on the corner of his desk.

The sight appeared to mesmerize Myrtle. “You're sure? I took the fertility draft in the Enchanted Forest. Will taking another potion here in Storybrooke work?”

Mr. Gold tipped his head. “I told you the child you're carrying shall forever be known as the baby of the family. Am I not a man of my word?”

Myrtle pushed through the curtains—her gray ponytail swinging, her stomach bobbing under a turquoise t-shirt that read, “Does This Baby Make Me Look Fat?” Behind her lagged a tall balding man—the husband who'd rather starve than abstain. Mr. Gold remembered him from the old world as a talented shoemaker. There, the Dark One's price to fulfill the couple's most desperate heart's desire had been a pair of basilisk skin boots.

As the old woman reached for the bottle, her husband grasped her shoulder. “I don't know about this.”

Sighing, Mr. Gold shook his head. “You're wondering whether I'm up to some trickery. Perhaps I mean this will be the last baby Fertile Myrtle will ever carry. If she drinks my potion, next time she may become pregnant with something else.”

The old woman jerked her hand back and clapped it to her mouth.

Mr. Gold chuckled. “But what advantage would that be to me? On that basis you can trust I brewed
this potion to do what you want it to do: cancel the previous potion. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Cautiously, Myrtle picked up the bottle. When the contents fizzed, she wavered.

“Carbonated to be gentle on the stomach,” Mr. Gold said. “Flavored with lemon and lime and a touch of rosewater.”

He watched her pull out the stopper and sniff it. Finally, she tilted the bottle and drank. Her husband's hand stayed on her shoulder. After shaking the last drop onto her tongue, she set the empty bottle on the desk. “I don't feel any different.”

If you did, you'd be even more suspicious. Mr. Gold shrugged. “I remember what you felt when you drank my other potion. I could see it in your face: joy.” He leaned back in his chair, flicking his glance between the husband and wife. “Tell me: which child made you decide our deal had been a mistake? Number four, five? And every child since has been a regret?” He laced his fingers. “If the one you're carrying now is too much, I can readily find a couple happy to adopt.”

Cupping her hands over her belly, Myrtle shrank against her husband. “Mother Goose is a liar. We never had so many children that we didn't know what to do.”

The old man hugged his wife. “After the Evil Queen taxed us out of our house, we had to take shelter in abandoned giants' boots. In hard times, we sometimes sent our children to bed on broth without any bread. But we never—never, ever—whipped them soundly.”

“Well, then.” Mr. Gold raised his eyebrows. “If you have no regrets, you have no reason to be angry with me.” And yet, you are. Noting how the old man kept his arm protectively around his wife, Mr. Gold wondered whether they’d be good candidates for donating a couple of hairs. He looked aside. Best leave that request to Charming.

With the deal done, Mr. Gold grabbed his cane. When the couple turned to shamble out, he added, “Don't forget the crutch.”

Archie looked over the stock of beers and sodas crammed into Geppetto's refrigerator and decided it would do. If they finished the party preparations in time, they might catch the concert. Hearing a scraping noise, he looked over his shoulder to see Pinocchio pushing the kitchen table toward the back door. He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“It's a lovely night,” his godson said. “Let's eat on the patio.”

Archie frowned. “The sky may be clear, and the radio may be promising fair weather, but Mr. Gold told me we'll see rain. Who would you believe?”

Pinocchio scratched his beard. “I'll set up the snacks in here.”

“Wise.” Archie was just checking his to do list when he caught the opening notes of “From a Distance.” Patting the breast pocket of his tweed jacket, he grinned. The night before, when Vincent had recalled the Bette Midler cassette they'd played and replayed on their Mardi Gras road trip, Archie had searched for the ringtone, bought it, and assigned it to his imaginary college roommate's number. Anything that linked the fantasy of those implanted memories with the reality of his growing relationship with the brilliant, warm-hearted—and still wildly handsome in his Facebook photos—Vincent made Archie ridiculously happy.

But he was painstaking about keeping their interactions to himself.
“Excuse me,” he mumbled as he hurried out of the dining room. Counting the times the notes recycled, he rounded the corner into Geppetto’s living room and rushed up the stairs to the second-floor bathroom. Just as the phone reached seven—the repeat that would trigger his answering message—he locked the door and tapped his touchscreen. “Hello?”

“Arch!” Vincent exclaimed. “You’ll never guess where I am.”

Archie cast his mind across the rich, full life his friend had described. Was he about to dine with an eminent neuropsychologist at the Rutgers faculty club? Was his amateur blue grass band set to perform in the United Methodist Church’s basement? Or perhaps his news had something to do with the intellectual pursuit Archie found most intriguing of all: Vincent’s fascination with the psychosocial significance of fairy tales. When his friend had mentioned it, Archie had lain sleepless the rest of the night, his mind reeling from the astonishing coincidence.

“No guesses? Then I’ll tell you: Maine. The University’s Folklife Center asked me to replace a seminar speaker who contracted the flu, and I flew up here immediately. Serendipity, right? According to where you told me your Storybrooke is, I’m about an-hour-and-a-half from your door.”

Archie’s lips parted. This couldn’t be happening.

“My talk isn’t until one o’clock Saturday. Tonight you can show me how small-town life’s been treating you. I rented a Prius at the airport. Give me directions and I’m on my way.”

Archie remained speechless. The thought of meeting Vincent face-to-face filled his mind with such wonderful images that he nearly let out a whimper. But he knew those visions were as false as his memories. His friend wouldn’t find him no matter what instructions he gave. The Storybrooke curse would see to that.

Archie wrenched the cold-water knob on the bathroom sink and splashed his flushed face. Pressing his forehead against the medicine cabinet, he murmured, “Sorry, Vince. Your coming to Storybrooke isn’t a good idea.”

According to his custom, Mr. Gold entered the playhouse long before the seats filled. He abhorred bumping into people. He chose a chair on the center aisle, though a few rows nearer the stage than usual. Propping his cane in the crook of his arm and laying his bouquet of homegrown solarium roses on his lap, he opened his program.

Quickly, he ran his gaze down the selections—a mix of current radio hits, oldies embedded by the curse in their collective psyches, and songs he recognized from back home. Their new world claimed the latter as folk music—the same way it took their old world's juiciest scandals, bravest deeds, and wildest anecdotes and called them fairy tales—but he knew the songs' true origins. As the ageless Dark One, he'd helped many of their minstrel composers secure their court debuts.

When Mr. Gold didn't see Belle's name, his forehead knitted together. Then he turned the page and released his breath. Hers would be the penultimate performance just before the mass ensemble finale. “Ms. Belle French, accompanied by Mr. Papageno on bells and Ms. Papagena on flute, will sing a surprise favorite from the Enchanted Forest.”

Carefully, Mr. Gold settled the flowers on the seat next to him. If he held them, he'd reduce them to petals. He straightened his peacock blue tie, smoothed down his black silk suit, rested his hands on his knees, and set his facial expression at neutral. He was determined to suffer the wait until Belle sang without giving the rest of Storybrooke cause to whisper—no matter how his pulse was racing or how his thoughts were flying.
Just before the show started, Smee drifted around the packed playhouse lobby, trying his best to look trustworthy. All the while he kept his eyeballs peeled for the hard-to-find object that would release him from servitude to the damned biscuit tin jammed under his arm.

*Look for something precious wrapped in yellow,* the cajoling voice had advised. *Once you identify it, follow it. At your earliest opportunity, take it.*

Everything yellow grabbed his attention: the writing on the bags of popcorn that ticket holders had carried in from the fair outside; the bow on a teddy bear a kid had won at the darts game; the quilt an old man had bought at the crafts table. But nothing he saw was actually wrapped in yellow.

*You'll know it when you see it,* the box had said. Smee wished he could lift the tin's lid and tell the bossy white light what it was full of.

Scrutinizing the crowd, he spied the wheeler-dealer boy who'd fobbed the evil tin off on him in the first place. The pipsqueak was busy pinching his little sister. Smee was considering ways to brush past while accidentally kicking him in the shins when the woman handing out programs hissed, “Jack Horner, this is your last warning! If you won't be a good boy, I'm sitting you in the corner. And you can forget about plum pie.”

Smee set off in a new direction, then stopped when he recognized the backside of the nun-slash-fairy-slash-question-mark who'd nearly sicced Sheriff Charming on him. This time he looked her stern up and down and almost whistled. Her dark blue habit was bulky, but if her slim calves were any clue, a trim and tidy figure was stowed within. His coat pockets clinked with gold doubloons—just enough for the likes of her to spend an evening with the likes of him. He sucked his cheek. *If only I had the time.*

Then something happened that made Smee's jaw drop. A dumpy little man grabbed her elbow, and she giggled. The man was a whole hand's span shorter than she was—a fairy tale land dwarf, for crying out loud. Yet her laughter was jubilant—as if she were a sailor overboard and the dwarf were a lifeline.

When the beauty-with-no-taste turned to face her escort, then caught sight of Smee, his mouth was still open. Quickly, he shut it.

“Oh, hi!” she gushed. “You and your nephew looking forward to the music?”

“Nephew? Oh, right. Nephew.” Smee gave her his best I-ain't-up-to-nothing grin and sauntered away. He couldn't wait to nick the yellow package and hoist anchor. According to the biscuit tin, the bag of fairy dust he'd appropriated could fly a grown man straight to Neverland. There he'd be free—of both the tin and this crazy world. If that thought wasn't happy enough to make him soar like a Lost Boy, nothing was.

Mr. Gold sat stiffly through the first ten musical acts. When at last the curtains parted to reveal Belle, his tension melted. She stood before a painted backdrop of gray castle walls, dressed in yellow satin as bright as the sun. *The same golden gown she wore the day she agreed to be my housekeeper.*

The low collar, intricately embroidered in rose gold, slipped off her slender shoulders. The v-waist bodice hugged her delicate curves. The full skirt swayed as she strolled to the front of the stage.

As always, Mr. Gold was struck by what opposites they were. Gazing at the audience, Belle seemed to relax—as if the realization that hundreds of eyes were on her boosted her confidence. The only
way he'd ever been able to bear a crowd staring at him was with the knowledge that he could, if necessary, rain fire on them, turn them into pigs, or—at the very least—double their rents.

Behind her, the green-costumed bell-ringer and flutist began to play. After a few notes, Belle joined them, her voice rising as joyously as a bird's—just as it had so many years ago, bringing sunshine into every corner of the Dark One's castle.

*When the nightingale sings*
*The woods grow green,*
*Leaf and grass and blossom spring…*

*Thank goodness the lights are out,* Mr. Gold thought. No one could see him clasping his hands, trying to contain the flood of emotions her song evoked.

When Belle finished the verse, she drifted to the side, leaving the spotlight to the flute and bells. Mr. Gold watched her, trying to discern her shadowed face. When she walked back to center stage, her expression was thoughtful as both the melody and the lyrics grew wistful.

*I have sighed many sighs,*
*Beloved, for your glance.*
*To me love is never nearer,*
*Love is but an endless dance.*
*Sweet beloved, think of me.*
*Bracing my heart to take the chance…*

Mr. Gold pressed his hand to his mouth. Her words filled him with the same longing he'd felt hearing them float up from his rose garden to his lonely library tower. Then she smiled, and the song's key changed again—becoming buoyant, hopeful, daring.

*While I live in the world so wide*
*None other will I seek!*  
*With your love, my sweet love,*
*My bliss would be unique.*
*Any trial I'll endure.*
*Your kiss shall be my cure.*

When he realized that the thunder surrounding him was applause, Mr. Gold collected himself to join them. But when people all around the audience stood for an ovation, he couldn't.

*Oh, Belle.* She was asking him to be with her again—using the sweetest, most tender coercion she could devise. In the Enchanted Forest, he'd lacked the courage to even consider the song's invitation was meant for him. Now it would take every bit of strength he possessed to deny it.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? It's unsettling posting into a void.
Chapter Summary

The good ships Rumbelle and Swanfire set sail.

Bon voyage!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Grumpy (Leroy):** But if love's so great, then why do I feel so bad? *(Dreamy)*

Standing in the packed playhouse lobby, Belle objected to yet another overblown compliment. Once more, she raised herself to tiptoes and craned her neck. *Where's Rumple?* That she was five foot two and he was a scant half foot taller didn't help. Try as she might, all she could see were her friends and family pressing around her awkwardly wide ball gown. *He's probably looking for me right now,* she assured herself. She didn't want to consider the alternative—that his shyness around crowds had sent him home or kept him away in the first place.

Trying her best to smile, Belle answered questions left and right—yes, she knew earth's version of "When the Nightingale Sings" was slightly different; no, her love of singing was natural, not implanted by the curse; yes, though old-world dresses were exquisite, she'd be glad to change into something less cumbersome. *But not before I find Rumple.*

Ruby nodded. "I can't imagine flipping hamburgers in that outfit, that's for sure." Before Belle could respond, her friend's gaze latched onto something on the far side of the lobby. "I see a man who looks like he wants to turn half the room into toads."

Sheriff David's smile became a scowl, Papageno and Papagena shrank back, and Granny planted her hands on her hips. Belle knew Doc and Happy couldn't see through the crowd any better than she could, but they managed to appear disapproving as well. Everyone's reactions could mean only one person: *Rumple.*

Belle contained the fluttery feeling in her stomach with feigned nonchalance. "Hmm?"

"Don't pretend you didn't know he was coming." Unlike the others, Ruby was practically winking at her. "Or that he'd bring roses."

*He did?* Belle exhaled a happy sigh. Glancing up, she saw her father glare over his shoulder. Then he hunched down to search her face. "Belle, honey, you can't possibly be considering—"

"Father, you promised." Belle stretched to bring her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "You promised that if I forgave you for what you did to me, you'd forgive him for what he did to you."

Shaking his head, her father muttered, "I said if he *apologizes.* You know he'll never do that."

Belle twined her fingers in his and spoke more softly still. "After I explain how you
misunderstood him so that you tried to send me across the border to erase my Enchanted Forest memories, then he'll apologize for misunderstanding you." I hope.

Her father growled. "Rumplestiltskin didn't just misunderstand me. What he did was—"

"Father!"

Granny snorted. "Don't be so coy. Everybody knows that last Valentine's Day that monster sent Moe to the emergency room."

From the shock on Papageno's and Papagena's faces, Belle saw the story was news to them. Swallowing hard, she wrapped an arm around her father. "What everyone doesn't know is that Regina convinced Rumple my father had locked me in a tower where I was beaten and tortured until I leapt to my death. If my father had believed such a lie about Rumple, he'd have done worse to him." When she caught him growling again, she squeezed his hand. "You admitted you would."

David shook his head. "You can't seriously be defending—"

"I'm not defending anything about notions of justice in the Enchanted Forest—not lords beheading peasants without a trial nor royals imprisoning people at their whim." Belle cast David a meaningful look. "And certainly not the moral obligation—taught to you men in your cradles—of wreaking vengeance for harms, real or alleged, done to loved ones. And now Rumple sees the pitfalls of Enchanted Forest justice, too." Glancing from face to face, she observed skepticism. "Come on. You all heard him at the Town Hall meeting."

Granny rolled her eyes then squinted across the room. "Well, at least he has the common sense to realize when he's not wanted. Good riddance."

"What? He's leaving?" Belle let go of her father, grabbed two handfuls of satin skirt, lifted it above her ankles, and jostled her way between him and Doc. Thankfully, nobody tried to stop her. With urgent excuse me's, she wove through the throng until Mr. Smee blocked her path. 

Ironic, she thought. When her father had tried to send her through the mine tunnel to permanent amnesia, the pudgy, fidgeting man standing before her was the one paid to do it. She'd already forgiven Mr. Smee. If I can do that, then Father can forgive Rumple.

"Pretty frock," he mumbled, his eyes dropping to her bodice. "I've rarely seen one so yellow."

"Mm-hmm," Belle responded, gazing past his red cap to Rumple shuffling with his cane toward a side exit. She was just about to politely remind Mr. Smeed where her face was when he edged backwards and let her pass. After a few more steps, she called out, "Rumple! Wait!"

He stopped but didn't turn. Not until she was close enough to almost touch his shoulder did he pivot on his cane. Unhappily, she could see he'd used the pause to compose his face into a mask of geniality.

"Belle, my dear, what a surprise you found that gown. It was never in my shop." As courtly as a knight, Rumple extended his bouquet—a dozen long-stemmed roses in pinks, lavenders, and burgundies. "If I'd known you'd be wearing it, I'd have picked the Golden Dawns instead." His voice was pleasant, but his smile remained formal and distant.

Accepting the flowers, Belle kept her tone as light as his. "This dress was boxed up in the library attic along with your books and mine. You should see what else Regina hid up there."

"She was always petty." Rumple's eyes flickered towards Belle's then down to his shoes. "Thank
you for alerting me to this concert. Your song in particular was... Well, altogether, an agreeable
evening. But perhaps we should forego the hamburgers. My presence is chasing away your admirers,
and—"

"Don't be silly." Impulsively, Belle tucked her arm in his. "Tonight's our night for catching up."

At her touch, Rumple tensed. Seeing discomfort on his face, Belle felt her stomach drop. He wasn't
pleased to see her. He was trying to politely extricate himself from their date. Why had she been so
pushy? How could she have assumed he'd missed her just because she'd missed him? Their
separation was her fault. Down in the mines, in a moment of pique, she'd said she never wanted to
see him again. If he'd taken her at her word and moved on, she had no one to blame but herself. *Love
doesn't always last forever.*

Belle looked aside, blinking rapidly. Burdening Rumple with her tears would be unfair. She listened
to him inhale and exhale as she gathered the courage to take her leave.

Before she could, Rumple murmured, "Sweetheart... Belle... You've made up with your father...
something I've been dreading... Now that you've heard what he has to say, how can you want
anything to do with me ever again?"

At *Sweetheart*—the endearment he reserved just for her—Belle relaxed. After that, nothing he said
could dishearten her. No fiasco was irreparable—not if their love was true. "Oh, Rumple, we have a
*lot* to catch up."

Rocking gently in the treetop lookout hammock, Emma tried to figure out Mary-Margaret.
Discovering that her best-friend-forever was actually her mother had been strange enough. Watching
her turn into a nervous meddling mother was baffling. When Emma's temper had been at full boil,
Mary-Margaret couldn't stop advocating for Neal. Now that she'd let off enough steam to want his
explanations, her mother kept interrupting. Before she could let Neal into Henry's life, didn't they
have to learn to get along?

Methodically, Emma examined the vicinity—left-to-right, right-to-left, scanning in smaller and
smaller circles ending with the campfire. *No Hook. No pirates.* Near the catalpa tree, she detected a
twinkle of fairy dust. In a moment, a glittery figure lifted off the ground and angled toward her.
When the flyer floated near enough for identification, her eyes widened. "I'd begun to think I'd
imagined your escapade with the rodents-of-unusual-size. Now I'm convinced. You *are* Peter Pan."

At her friendly words, the familiar, impossible-to-hate laugh lines fanned from the corners of Neal's
eyes. "I brought you dessert: honey-whipped mallows from a genuine marsh. Do I have permission
to land?"

Neal hovered in the sparkling dust. Staring back at him, Emma felt a knot in her chest. How could
she be civil when what she really wanted to do was yank him on top of her—like it was 2001 and
the hammock was the backseat of their Volkswagen bug? Yet how could she be craving a man
who'd dumped her on the say-so of a fairy?

Emma saw Neal's forehead wrinkle. Was he reading her doubts? Before he could decide to hand her
the sweets and fly away, she scooted over so abruptly, the hammock nearly flipped.

Neal's hand shot out to steady it. Then he pulled himself up and settled down beside her. "Thanks for
offering to help find my friends. But what about Henry? He told Aurora that Mr. Gold is collecting
the magic to make a portal. Don't let your resentment of him keep you from getting back to
Storybrooke. I mean, what could he have done to make you so *angry?"
"You don't want to know." Not when the answer—*he betrayed my trust*—would strike so close to home.

"I do want to know." Neal cleared his throat. "I really, really do."

Belle held Rumple's bouquet in one hand while her other clasped the collar of his suit jacket, snug and warm against the cold. She wasn't sure which of his kindnesses made her feel more cherished. *Let me go change,* she'd offered. *No matter,* he'd replied, easing her arms into his jacket's silk-lined sleeves before they ventured into the chilly night. Of course, Rumple had his own motive for keeping her in her yellow dress: he saw it as a talisman. After all, isn't that why she'd worn it?

*Remember that evening we danced on my castle terrace?* he had asked as he pulled his jacket over her bare shoulders.

*Always,* she had answered. A canopy of stars, a pair of nightingales in the willow, the perfume of a thousand roses wafting up from the garden—how could she forget?

For the sake of that memory, Rumple huddled beside her now, clenching his cane, suffering the miserable November cold in his shirtsleeves. The bench they'd found by the community center's handball court was nicely out-of-the-way. Untangling the quarrel between Rumple and her father definitely required privacy. But before the evening was over, Belle was determined to dispel his gloom and draw him into the lights and laughter waiting just around the corner.

"Yeah," Rumple said at last, "I can see why your father wanted to erase your memories of me."

*Now we're getting somewhere.* "My father believed you'd been holding me captive from the moment I left his castle, throughout the twenty-nine years of the curse, and after the curse broke. When I told him I'd *never* been your prisoner, he decided I was experiencing the worst case of Stockholm Syndrome ever." From Rumple's grimace, Belle could see he'd heard of it.

Rumple centered his cane against his knees and rested his hands on top. "It's a wonder Maurice didn't call it Dark One's Castle Syndrome."

"Add to that my father's misconception that you were the sort of man who'd thrash someone over a petty theft—of a broken piece of china, no less, well..." When Belle raised an eyebrow at Rumple, he looked away.

"The cup... the cup was the last..." Rumple's shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. "In the Enchanted Forest, when I believed you'd been driven to suicide, I left your father alone. I assumed he was stewing in his guilt as I was stewing in mine. Here in Storybrooke, when my memories returned, my shame came flooding back as well. When Maurice stole the cup, I thought he remembered—and that knowledge about its significance could only have come from torturing you... If getting back at me was all that mattered to him, well, I found such lack of remorse intolerable..."

He hung his head. "I should have realized Maurice's memories had *not* returned, that Regina had tricked him into taking the cup, that he found my rage a mystery. But none of that—none of that—would ever have happened, not if I hadn't allowed myself to be tricked by that wretched, evil queen in the first place." He shuddered. "Oh, Belle. I hurt your father—even though he'd done *nothing* to you. That's unforgivable."

"Not if you apologize. My father told me that if you apologize, he will forgive you. He promised."

Rumple released a low, husky laugh. "Now I *truly* feel sorry for Maurice. He's promised the dearest woman who ever lived something he really, really doesn't want to do."
Belle bit her lip. How many such promises had she extracted from Rumple? "Now that I've had time to reflect, I see I can be a bit pushy—"

Rumple twisted on the bench to face her. "No, not pushy. Don't say that. You're being a shepherd—a shepherd over very wayward sheep." As he gazed at her, the lines on his forehead deepened. "Now you know why I never took you out, why I dissuaded you from going into town, why I did everything I could to keep us isolated."

"Hmm." Belle tilted her head. "How long did you think you could keep that up?"

"I don't know... Not long. I was hoping to collect some memories of a time you knew me as a man—before everybody told you what kind of man."

Belle placed the roses on her lap and reached out for Rumple. "Do you know what our problem was? I acted as if the only possible measure of our love was happily ever after—and that wringing promises from you could ensure it. And you? You acted as if the only possible measure was days, and that each day together meant one day closer to the end."

Belle saw Rumple glance at her hand, lying atop his. "You said I needed courage... courage to let you in..."

Belle recalled the dark, fathomless misery her outburst had brought to his eyes. Immediately after, she'd fled upstairs to their bedroom, dressed, and climbed out the window. "I'm the one who lacked courage. I wanted time on my own to think and study and figure things out. How could I share my life with you if I had no life? But I was too cowardly to tell you face-to-face."

"What I've come to realize is that only true love is forever. Happily is a work in progress."

Trying not to sway the lookout hammock, Emma wriggled around to face Neal. Why he was so keen on hearing about Gold, she didn't know—but talking about her double-dealing mentor-menace with someone with no preconceptions would do her good. She couldn't bring Gold up to her mother—not without being upstaged by yet another Enchanted Forest tale from when he was the Dark One. Here was her chance to talk about Storybrooke without anyone or anything interrupting her.

"So," she began, "which first—the shocking rumors or the dastardly deeds I know firsthand?"

Emma paused. She had thought her joking words would bring a chuckle. Instead, the laugh lines that had radiated from the corners of Neal's eyes winked out, one by one.

Before Emma had a chance to question why worry now creased Neal's forehead, her ears caught a faint but alarming sound. Off in the distance, carried by the wind, was that a wail? When she twisted to look, so did he. Despite the horror stirring in her chest, she gave the horizon a methodical scan. Far, far away—a couple of miles if we're lucky—she sighted a misshapen hulk lurching across a treeless ridge. Another slouched after it, then another.

"No, no, no. Cora couldn't have discovered their secret camp. Before Emma could force the dreaded word out of her mouth, Neal gasped it.
"Zombies."

Chapter End Notes

When I was planning this book (a plan that was constantly derailed), I wanted Rumbelle and Swanfire to sail merrily along through this long night with alternating scenes running in parallel. Then I realized that the spontaneous, always-on-the-run, live-like-there's-no-tomorrow Emma and Neal would zip right through apologies and into makeup sex while Belle was still searching for the right words and Rumple was still battling his heart-stopping dread of letting her in.

Emma and Neal needed something to slow them down and give their reunion more depth.

Thus, zombies.
Let Me Know

Chapter Summary

Belle lies.
Regina gripes.
Neal worries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Emma:** You can't seriously be willing to risk this. *(The Queen is Dead)*

When Belle coaxed Rumple around the side of the community hall and saw the colorful booths strung with lights, she smiled. Then she felt his arm tense. *Ah, he's missing his jacket.* She knew how much he relied on looking sharp. Likely, he felt uncomfortable entering a public place sporting the armbands, usually hidden, that held his cuffs the perfect centimeter above the base of his thumb.

Slipping her bouquet under her arm, Belle started on the top button. "You need this, Rumple. Give me five minutes, and I'll be back in my wool skirt and blazer."

"Sweetheart. Please." Rumple took hold of her hand. "I'm just thinking what a disaster it will be for you to be seen with me. Like taking a stand against the entire town. All the friends you've made—you'll lose them instantly."

Rumple's anxiety brought a catch to Belle's throat, and she pressed her cheek to his shoulder. "People are nicer than you give them credit for. You'd think we were facing the walking dead."

Rumple shivered. "I'm thankful Regina didn't bring any of her mother's zombies to Storybrooke."

*Thankful indeed!* Spying a familiar face, Belle smiled. "But she did bring one or two people you get along with. There's Skyrgámur. And look! Polly from the gas station." In human form, the fearsomely huge ogre chief stood a mere six foot nine. His artfully tattooed date—an avid reader of Regency romances, Belle recalled—came up to his Adam's apple. Linking her arm through Rumple's, Belle gave him a gentle tug.

"Oh, Belle. I'm sure Skyr already sees more of me than—" When his usual driver caught sight of them, Rumple ended his sentence in a cough.

"Sir!" Skyr strode forward, parting the crowd, towing his date along with him.

When he stopped in front of them, Belle craned her neck back. She remembered just enough Ogrish for a compliment. "You and pretty Polly make a pretty pair." But instead of smiling at her halting attempt, Skyr slowly lowered his frozen yogurt cone until it hung dripping at his side.

"Please, Robin Rosebud," he rumbled, using the name his kind had coined for her in the Enchanted Forest. "Polly doesn't know my true past. If you and Magpie Fire-thrower could—"

"Of course," Rumple said quickly.
"English, everyone," Polly said, glancing from Belle to Rumple and up to Skyr. "It's bad enough being left out when we visit your family. But if your friends are going to speak Bear too, I'm putting my foot down."

"Don't worry," Belle said quickly. "I've used up practically all of the—the Bear I know."

Charming stared at the very odd pair of couples chatting at the edge of the fair. Though most people's attention would have been caught by the giant, his was on the pest in the black pinstripe shirt. Rumplestiltskin had some nerve holding back his true love potion from the Snow-and-Emma rescue mission. For qualms about its viability? Seriously? With Belle cuddling up to him like a purring kitten? If that wasn't evidence of the potency of the glowing, sparking, fizzing bottle sitting on Rumplestiltskin's bookshelf, then Charming didn't know his purple passion potions.

"That leaves four more," he muttered, "not five."

"Sheriff."

Only one woman in Storybrooke could pack so much disdain into such a simple word: Regina. Rubbing the knot in the back of his neck, Charming decided he'd be damned if he'd turn around at her command. Instead, he took out his cell phone and clicked on the screen. "Eight-sixteen. That leaves you forty-four more minutes with Henry before I take him home for bedtime. Your next visit isn't until Thursday—at precisely five p.m. for dinner. Are you sure you want to waste your evening picking on me?"

"Henry's at the archery game. He's trying to win me a commemorative plate. He's fine."

Charming continued showing Regina his back. "Five arrows for a dollar? He'll hit the bull's-eye in two." He smiled. Snow would be happy when she saw how well he'd taught their grandchild.

Regina coughed. "Sheriff, I don't like talking to you any more than you like talking to me. But turn around. This is important." She blew out her breath. "Please."

Slowly, Charming faced the woman who'd ripped apart his happily-ever-after. In her slinky red dress, the Evil Queen was one shapely, provocative woman. For someone old enough to be my big sister. But she's not the fairest. That's my Snow White. All the books say so.

When Charming finally focused on Regina's dark, glossily made-up eyes, she tossed her head, flinging back the wing of black hair that slanted across her forehead. Good grief. She can't breathe without acting seductive.

"So, sheriff—when were you going to tell me about my mother?"

Charming folded his arms. "That she's working on a happy reunion? I thought it would be more fun to surprise you."

"Don't play games." Regina's upper lip curled. "Cora is alive, in the Enchanted Forest, and trying to get to Storybrooke. That princess person Henry met in the sleeping curse netherworld told him that twenty-one hours ago, yet you didn't have the common courtesy to inform me of it—not of the fact you and the imp are conspiring to build a portal so anyone can travel back and forth at will." She perched her hands on her hips, posing like a cover girl despite her tirade. "What sort of idiot are you?"

Charming shrugged. "As I recall, you were the scourge of the Enchanted Forest. And we handled you, didn't we? You sucker punched us with your Storybrooke curse, but we took care of
"We? Who is this we? The forces of goodness and light? Puh-leeeeeze." Regina let one hip drop. "You don't know Cora. She has no heart. She feasts on people who think in terms of we. I stood up to her once—pushed her out of the Enchanted Forest, banished her to a land where she couldn't do us any harm. Don't fall all over yourself thanking me. But I only managed it because she'd already killed the man I loved. I had nothing to lose."

_Daniel the stable boy._ According to Snow, he'd been a nice guy. Charming hadn't liked him so much after Dr. Whale—uh, Dr. Victor Frankenstein—jump-started his corpse. Ripping off the arm of one's re-animator didn't seem like good manners. He wondered what price Rumplestiltskin had collected to re-attach it. Thank goodness Daniel's ashes were now resting in Regina's mausoleum. _Dead is dead._

"So your mother likes to get to people by going after their loved ones? I thought that was _your_ specialty." Charming jerked his head toward the couples he'd been observing before Regina's intrusion. "Too bad Snow and Emma got between you and the wraith. I _know_ why Rumplestiltskin conjured it."

"You mean... Belle?" Regina blinked her feathery lashes in a flurry of innocence. "What harm did I do Belle? She looks perfectly fine to me. Though her friends _should_ organize an intervention—warn her of the dangers of hooking up with violent, evil men."

Charming frowned. Did Regina have a point? His gaze drifted to the wily wizard and the big-hearted bookworm. Dave the Dove and Polly Jenks were laughing at an anecdote Rumplestiltskin was illustrating with wide sweeps of his cane. Apparently, he didn't need it for support. He was leaning on Belle.

Charming smiled in relief. _Their potion's doing fine. Definitely only four more to go._ As for Regina, how could he get her to stop blocking foot traffic?

"Hey, Gramps!"

_Henry!_ Only eleven, and his grandson already knew how to charge to the rescue. Charming turned to wave. The boy was hopping up and down in the middle of the crowd, holding up a painted plate: Washington crossing the Delaware. _Regina won't have a clue what that's about, but she'll have to work it into her décor anyway._ Charming gave the young hero a thumbs up.

Then he checked his phone again and announced, "Forty-one minutes."

"Hmph." Regina tossed her hair and strode off toward her adopted son.

Watching her, Charming marveled at how she could swivel her hips while walking a line as narrow as a tightrope. _In stiletto heels, no less._ But when the Evil Queen reached Henry, she immediately became all mother. She hunkered down to his level, ooh-ed and ahh-ed over the prize he'd won and hugged him with a fervor that was pure maternal pride.

Charming hated to admit it, but regarding his grandson, Regina thought in terms of _we._

By the time Skyr and Polly took their leave, Rumple's forehead was smooth while the skin at the edges of his eyes was dimpled—exactly what Belle had been longing to see. In Storybrooke, his playful moods were all too rare. Why did her mind have to pick this moment to vex her with a troubling question?

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "You're pensive all of a sudden."
"It's nothing. Let's—"

"Sweetheart. Don't tell me you're going to be evasive."

"Hmm." Belle pursed her lips. "It's just... I was wondering... I mean, after what Skyr said..." Taking a deep breath, she plunged. "If you could get away with lying to me about your past, would you do it?"

"Obliterate my former life with one lie? Never have to deal with it? And you'd never know?" Rumple jiggled his head. "Absolutely. In a heartbeat."

Not the answer I was hoping for. Belle lifted her chin. "Well, I think Skyr's being unfair to Polly, pretending he's a former sapient bear. He should trust her to be understanding." Thank goodness I already know too much about Rumple for him to get away with such a brazen lie. Love requires honesty.

He drew a long, deep breath. "Back in the Enchanted Forest, Polly was a soldier. She disguised herself as a man to help defend her town. That town was Avonlea."

"Oh." Belle felt her certainty fading. "But Skyr wasn't involved. His tribe was several realms away."

"What was it people used to say? An ogre is an ogre?"

Belle passed her bouquet from hand to hand, unsure of how to answer. At last she murmured, "Only people who didn't know better."

"You would never have met an ogre, never have given them a chance—not if I hadn't insisted that accompanying me on my yearly rounds was a condition of our deal. You said my demands were cruel. And you'd only heard about the massacre. Polly is one of the few who survived it." Rumple pressed his hand against his eyes then dropped it. "You came to understand the ogres. You can't assume Polly will do the same."

"But to love Skyr, she needs to truly know him. Doesn't she deserve that chance?" Like I deserve the chance to truly know you.

"What's past is... past." Rumple fidgeted with his cane. "Why dredge up a horrible incident that can't be... undone. Why risk having Polly's memories of Avonlea destroy her image of the man Skyr is— is trying, trying with all his heart to be now?"

Reluctantly, Belle nodded. Regretfully, she noted she'd brought back Rumple's worry lines.

Swooping down from the lookout tree, Neal couldn't help but sigh. His first flight with Emma in his arms, and all she could talk about was zombies.

"The group Mary-Margaret, Mulan, and I faced was small. They moved slow like in a horror flick, but they could use weapons—swords, spears, axes. Does Cora program them and send them on their way? Or control everything they do? We didn't get a chance to ask."

Touching ground, Neal pressed a finger against his lips. Then he whispered, "One thing we know, they can't fly. But we can. Just don't say the Z word. If a single member of my crew has heard of them, he'll panic everyone. Freaked out boys can't have happy thoughts."

"Got it," Emma whispered.
Neal pointed to Tootles’ sleeping quarters where he’d left Tink brushing her long blonde hair. Emma gestured to suggest they give a wide berth around the talking, wrestling, and back-slapping boys beside the campfire. Together, they hurried through the shadows.

Reaching the vine-draped lean-to, Neal saw no sign of fairy sparkle. He sucked in his breath. Ducking into the hut, he groped around in the dark. At last he laid his hand on the mitten where Tink slept on cold nights. Feeling something inside, he smiled.

"You little jingle—" Neal whispered as he rolled back the cuff. As his fingers brushed something rough, his stomach clenched. The shape inside the mitten wasn't his friend. It was a pine cone.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Are some things best kept secret?
Whatever You Believe

Chapter Summary

A favorite side character makes an appearance.
Inigo justifies being added to this story.
Smee proves himself a really fun character to write.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Jefferson (The Mad Hatter):** What's crazier than seeing and not believing? (*Hat Trick*)

The first row of stalls Rumple and Belle visited, they were stared at, ignored, or handled with abject respect. Through it all, she kept her arm resolutely linked with his. When the quavering old man at the ring toss game asked whether his rent check had cleared, Rumple's lips thinned, and he returned a curt nod.

Belle grimaced. *If I don't find a friendly face soon, Rumple's going to beg off the hamburgers.* Surveying the milling fair-goers, she spotted a vaguely familiar young man: thick brown hair, broad forehead, square jaw, cleft chin, and dark mournful eyes. His long, black coat looked like it had come from their old world. A gray woven scarf swathed his neck.

Belle squeezed Rumple's arm. "There—the man I told you about. The one who freed me from the psych ward just before the curse broke. The one who told me to find you." Glancing at Rumple, she saw a smile hovering on his lips and sadness in his eyes. "You know him, don't you?"

"That's Jefferson. In the Enchanted Forest, we were colleagues."

"Colleagues? Does that mean he's—?"

"A wizard? Yeah, like his father before him. Or at least, he was. Charming, uh, David Nolan, was careless—criminally careless in my opinion—with the one tool necessary for Jefferson's magic to work. Without a charmed hat is a hatter wizard really a wizard at all?"

At first, Belle thought the melancholy young man was meandering aimlessly. Then she realized he was following a mother and father that were strolling arm-in-arm with a ten-year-old girl. *That's Paige. Her favorite book is Watership Down.* Like a faithful collie, Jefferson dogged their footsteps, stopped when they did, and paced about when they paused to look at something. Every now and then Paige would speak to him over her shoulder, yet he never closed the gap to walk with the family.

"If you were colleagues," Belle asked, "why did I never meet him?"

As Rumple stared at Jefferson, his expression grew more and more pained. "By the time you came to work for me, he'd gone missing, presumed dead. As it turned out Regina had ditched him outside the Enchanted Forest in an unpleasant land ruled by an unpleasant queen—a queen without a heart. Jefferson couldn't return home to his daughter. It drove him mad."

"Oh." No wonder the poor man looked forlorn. "You called him the hatter wizard. Now you say he's
"Mad. Does that make him the Mad Hatter?"

"He's been called that. How he can appear in a tale that pre-dates his father and mother, I'll never understand. But that's Wonderland for you."

Belle watched Paige pick up a patchwork rabbit, dandle it, and set it back down on the crafts table. As soon as she and the couple resumed walking, Jefferson picked up the stuffed animal and gave it a hug. Tears pricked Belle's eyes. "Let's go say hello." *It's the least we can do.*

"No. He's—he's having a good time with his daughter."

"Rumple!"

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. Looking at him, Belle had the sinking sensation he felt responsible for Jefferson's predicament.

"Hey, there. How's housekeeping?"

Recognizing the voice, Belle turned. August the writer beamed at her. Archie, the psychologist whose office sat across from the diner, and a gray-whiskered gentleman with a kind smile stood on either side of him. *Three friendly faces.* August's was still swollen, purple-and-red, over his right cheekbone. *Poor boy.* Belle wondered if he'd had his chance yet to show off his black eye to Ruby.

"Tink flitting off without telling anyone—she's done it before." Emma's words were reassuring, but Neal heard impatience in her tone.

"The last time," he whispered, "she didn't leave a pine cone in her place."

Emma leaned forward. "She'll explain when she gets back. Right now we have more urgent worries."

"I'm thinking." From the air, his crew could take on anything. Hell, they could even dodge cannonballs. But on the ground his pint-sized warriors would be kicked, skewered, grabbed, and munched.

"Well, think faster. Zombies. Remember?"

There. Emma had repeated the dreadful word. Since they couldn't fly anyway, maybe it would be best to tell everyone what they were facing. "We can't make a stand. Not with kids to protect."

"We can't outrun them, either," Emma said. "We're quicker, but we'll tire. Zombies never tire."

Horror movie monsters—here in the Enchanted Forest. Whatever happened to *Dead is dead?* Even after he became the Dark One, his father had never contested magic's number one rule.

Neal shivered. "We need to hide. Not in the trees. We don't know if these zombies can climb. We need a place where they can't find us. And we need it quick."

Archie shifted his observation from Pinocchio to Mr. Gold. For the past minute, his godson had been making wisecracks only those two understood. His most enigmatic client was finding each cryptic in-joke more outrageous than the last yet somehow more amusing. Archie noted that Belle looked as baffled as he was. At the same time, the humorous eye rolls her partner afforded each new quip were making her grin.
When Pinocchio arched a brow and said, "In some ways, I tried to be like a son," Mr. Gold groaned then started laughing.

"Stop," he managed between chuckles. "That's definitely as far as this line of conversation should go."

Archie straightened his glasses. "Pinocchio, you mentioned last spring. That's when you arrived in Storybrooke. Nobody knew who you were." As the mystery behind the banter became clear his eyes widened. "You were the stranger Mr. Gold mistook for his son."

"Yes." His godson rubbed his bearded chin. "Though I confess, I gave that misunderstanding a bit of help."

Belle's posture stiffened. "You tricked Rumple?"

"On purpose?" Geppetto gave a tight shake of his head.

Archie folded his arms, too disapproving for a response. He recalled Mr. Gold's distress the evening he'd called at his office—the turmoil on his face, the anguish in his eyes. At the time, Archie had been amnesic about the Enchanted Forest. That meant Mr. Gold couldn't share the circumstances of how he'd lost his son, reveal the length of their separation, nor even confess how deeply it tormented him. Yet he'd still needed to talk to someone about the mystery man he hoped-against-hope might be his son.

And Pinocchio took advantage of that?

Mr. Gold waved his hand. "No matter. Last spring, your boy was already reverting into wood. He was desperate. Desperation leads to desperate acts." When Pinocchio opened his mouth, Archie saw the man he'd wronged shoot him a warning glance. "He made things right by being one step on Emma's path to accepting that Storybrooke's plight was real. Her breaking the curse brought me one step closer to actually finding my son."

What a generous interpretation, Archie thought. He could see it made Belle relax. As the Dark One, Rumplestiltskin had had a nose for desperation—like a highly evolved extra sense—and he'd had a sinister, inhuman drive to satisfy the desires such desperation bred. Archie had witnessed those tendencies firsthand—to his everlasting shame. Apparently, Mr. Gold could still recognize a person in dire straits. This time had that recognition inspired tolerance?

Geppetto looked thoughtful. "Last spring, you called me to pick up an old cuckoo clock, insisted I come to your shop immediately. And there was my boy. To me, he was just a bearded young man I'd never seen before, but I remember you tried to get us to talk."

Mr. Gold shrugged. "Why waste a chance for a father-son reunion?"

At his offhand words, Archie saw Belle's smile become pure bliss.

True love. Archie pressed his hands together, new insights bubbling in his brain. As he tried to decide whether to blurt them out, his gaze lit on someone observing their group from a dozen yards away: The Blue Fairy. She was in her Mother Superior guise, of course—no-nonsense hairdo, drab navy-blue cape, gray wool skirt hanging below her knees. Sad that in Storybrooke, she didn't have her lacy fairy wings.

Just as Archie was about to wave, he saw his mentor's benevolent brown eyes begin to narrow. Mr. Gold's statement from Monday night stirred in his mind: There're no words strong enough to express how much we despise each other. A chill ran down Archie's back. He'd accepted that Mr. Gold...
harbored bitterness. But the Blue Fairy? She was the personification of all that was noble, pure, and light. Could the animosity between her and Mr. Gold really be two-way?

Before Archie's mind could fully process that disturbing thought, a familiar four notes emanated from his coat pocket: From a Distance. Vince had been hurt and upset when he'd told him not to come to Storybrooke. Was he calling to make up?

"Excuse me." Without caring how his sudden departure looked, Archie cut through the crowd. Anxiously, he counted the ringtone repeats as he hurried toward the semi-privacy of the parking lot. When he reached five, he couldn't stand it any longer. A foot past the last concession, he fished out his phone and tapped the screen.

Holding it to his ear, he heard, "Arch! I know why you didn't want me to come, and it's okay. Your secret is safe with me. Right now, I'm parked on Main. I'm staring at a charming old building with a corner entrance and a cute little clock tower. The sign says 'Storybrooke Free Public Library.' My GPS stopped working just outside of town, and I don't know where to go from here. Can you show me?"

Emma grimaced as she re-positioned her grip on the squirming Curly and Alfie. With only two Lost Boys mature enough to listen, that meant each of the six adults had responsibility for two not-so-mature boys. When we get back to Storybrooke, Mary-Margaret can use tonight as a fourth-grade math problem.

Her mom was doing better than she was. She'd convinced the twins that in the game of outwitting zombies, following orders earned points. The two would-be heroes Emma was restraining didn't care about that. They wanted their shot at glory now. If someone didn't figure out a hiding place soon, the boys would get their wish.

Emma swept her gaze across the group. So many ideas had been shot down that all she saw were boys torn between sobbing and demanding their swords and grownups shushing, muttering, and shaking their heads.

And then Inigo's face brightened. His sudden joy was so out-of-place, Emma wondered if he'd gone crazy. "The hole! The hole! That's the answer—the hole!"

"Oh, really?" If not for her struggling charges, Emma would have slapped him. "Get hold of yourself. We don't have time to dig a hole."

"Not a hole," Inigo said. "The hole—the hole of lightning sand I fell into. That's how we'll escape. Let me show you!"

Smee knew he'd lucked out when he found the masquerade booth: masks, veils, capes by the score and—best of all—a sweet old lady running it whose pince nez glasses kept slipping off her nose. When she stooped to rummage for them in a pile of bandannas, Smee made off with an armful of loot. In the crowd, he'd spied at least a dozen fair-goers wearing costumes. He'd fit right in.

Five minutes later, a brigand in a purple cloak and green hood with eye-holes was tailing the Dark One and the Package-Wrapped-in-Yellow. Through the stalls, past the crowd, around the side of the community center, clear up to the handball court, Smee followed them—with no one the wiser. He would have been pleased with his ingenuity, if only the task he was using it on wasn't nabbing Miss Belle French.
The first time Smee had snatched her had been different. According to Moe, the job was more of a rescue than an abduction. If he had known Mr. Gold was no longer just a pawnbroker with a limp, that he was once more the Dark One who could bushwhack a guy with a wave of his hand and string him up for an hour of sweat-like-a-pig questioning—would he have done it? For a damsel in distress, sure. Smee liked to think he was that kind of man.

But kidnap a lady who was hanging off her beau, whispering in his ear, massaging his neck, smiling at everything he said? That wasn't right. Miss Belle had gone out of her way to be sweet to Smee—to tell him no hard feelings for giving her a scare down in the mines. If a beauty like her had caught the eye of the richest man in town, who was Smee to spoil her good thing?

The couple stopped. When they turned toward each other, Smee ducked around the side of a dumpster. He strained his ears to listen.

"After twenty-nine years of psych ward soups, stews, mashes, and mushes, I'm ready for my hamburger."

A breathy laugh, then: "If I'd known you'd find fast food so fascinating, I'd have made you a burger myself. The markets are all closed, but say the word and I'll conjure us a little ground beef."

"Hmm. You're a superb chef—your teriyaki steak is to die for—but I promised Granny. My first hamburger has to be hers."

Silence.

"Come on. You've had a pleasant evening so far. No reason sharing hamburgers won't be just as nice. Ruby likes you. You know she does."

"But Granny?"

Silence. "Well, not so much. But she'll come around. You heard it from me first. Now I really have to change. I don't know if ketchup would come out of—"

The sentence broke off, but the couple wasn't silent. Smee detected smooching noises that made him wish he could scrunch the rusty tin clamped under his arm into scrap metal. Sure, he took pride in creeping. But he drew the line at peeping.

Smee stayed as quiet as a mouse until the noises subsided and he heard a door rasp. They've gone to the toilet! Even the tin couldn't expect him to follow them there.

Suddenly, Smee felt pressure on his back. An instant later, his body spun around, and his hood whipped off his head. A few yards away, the Dark One stood silhouetted against the light from the community center. He pointed, and a bolt of blue lightning shot out. Smee felt himself being dragged forward, his boot heels digging gashes in the muddy ground. He came to a dead halt close enough to see the glint in the Dark One's eyes. His body quaked but he couldn't scream. An unnatural force had his tongue in a knot.

"Do you know what you really are, dearie? Can't say? Let me show you."

Chapter End Notes
I liked what little we saw of the relationship between Rumplestiltskin and Jefferson on the show. The younger wizard looked up to the older wizard (he makes it clear to Dr. Frankenstein that the Dark One is in charge). Rumple trusted Jefferson (he tells him to take whatever amount of gold he thinks is a fair payment). They share an in-joke at Dr. Frankenstein’s expense. If Sebastian Stan hadn’t left for better opportunities, I'd have liked to see more of their mentor-apprentice relationship in the Enchanted Forest.
You Help People See Right from Wrong

Chapter Summary

Smee squeaks.
Archie freaks.
Mr. Gold waits.
The gang in the Fire Swamp can't wait.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Captain Hook**: Whatever story you think you know, my dear, is most certainly wrong. *(Tallahassee)*.

The Dark One twisted his hand into a fist. Red smoke swirled around Smee like a nor'easter, and he felt himself shrinking. In a second, his arm was too small to grip the rusty tin, and it clanked on the ground. His navy blue peacoat, khaki pants, clean white polo, and beloved red cap hung loosely around him. Then they dropped away. With mounting terror, he could feel his back hunching while his elbows pushed backwards, and his knees pushed forwards. Suddenly, he dropped to all fours.

*I'm buck naked*, Smee thought, until he jerked his head from side-to-side and saw he'd grown a pelt of bristly, white-and-brown fur. That and the gleaming toes of the Dark One's black dress shoes were all he could make out. When he craned his head to look up, everything above the hem of his tormentor's black pants was a blur.

But now the dumpster's stench was stupefying—rotting potatoes, moldy leaves, rancid tuna sandwiches. Even so, he could pick out the sandalwood, burnt amber, and mint that was the Dark One. With a squeal, he scurried in the opposite direction, heading for the one invitingly tight space he could see: under the dumpster.

Reaching the sheltering darkness, Smee panted in quick, panicky bursts that wiggled his whiskers. Then he felt a sharp jerk on his butt. “Eek!” He'd grown a tail—and the Dark One was using it to drag him, squeaking and scrabbling, back into the open.

Next thing he knew, Smee was writhing in midair. Squirming upside down, he glimpsed his tormentor crouched on his good leg with his bum leg stretched out in front of him. The hand that wasn't dangling Smee was grasping the cane.

“I have some questions, dearie. Don't be shy. Unless a former sapient rat ambles by, your secrets will be safe with me. Provide the answers I require, and I may opt for mercy and *not* slam you against this dustbin until every bone in your little rat body shatters.”

Smee went limp.

“Good. You understand the rules,” said the Dark One. “I know you shot me, and I know you struck me with a car. The only thing you got for your troubles is proof I can't be killed. Yet tonight, you're following me. Who put you up to it?”
Below him, Smee could see the biscuit tin lying on its side, a line of white glowing along its lid. I'm done for. Then he had a brilliant idea. Play one against the other. Either way, he'd make out. If the scorching light won, it would no longer need his services. If the Dark One did, he'd be grateful Smee had alerted him to his enemy.

Smees confession came out in hasty squeaks. “That box I was carrying. There's something in it. Something evil. Something that wants me to kidnap Miss Belle.”

When the Dark One responded, Smee couldn't believe his incredibly acute rat ears: “Why would the butcher pay you to go after me? We've never done business.”

Smeesquealed. “Butcher? I didn't say butcher! I said box. The one at your feet. Just open it and look.”

The Dark One shrugged. “This is about the butcher's father? But that was ages ago. The man broke a deal; what did he expect? He was only a pig for a week—ten days tops.”

“I thought you understood Rat!” Smeecame out as squeaks. How else could he react to the hot light escaping the tin's lid?

“Tell the butcher to settle this like a man: with a lawsuit. But relay to him my counter-claims: two suits, one coat, and one ebony, brass-handled cane.”

“I never said nothing about no goddamn butcher!”

Before Smee could squeal again, the Dark One tossed him in the air. He flailed his little rat legs, contorted his body, and whipped his tail, struggling to land on his feet. Then he felt his limbs elongating. Am I changing back? When his vision refocused, he could see—Huzzah! —his clothes arranging themselves over his increasingly human body. A moment later, he was squatting, hands on knees, retching.

The Dark One chuckled. “You must be the most incompetent dodgy guy ever. It's a wonder even the butcher would hire you.”

Smeesprung to his feet, stuttering, “The butcher—the butcher—”

“There, there,” the Dark One soothed, hauling himself hand-over-hand up his cane. “I'll square things with the butcher.” Tensing his jaw, he lifted himself to a standing position, straightening his good leg and pulling his bad leg up after him.

Warily, Smee peered down at the biscuit tin. The wreath of Christmas bells on the lid mocked him with its cheeriness. If the damn box could twist the meaning of his words when he was speaking Rat, no doubt it could do the same when he was speaking Human. There'd be no disobeying its demands now.

The Dark One brushed a scrap of lettuce off Smee's peacoat. “In the meantime, I trust you've suffered no permanent harm.”

Meekly, Smee shook his head.

“Good.” The Dark One's smile widened like the leer on the Jolly Roger's flag. “Just remember, dearie... the next time I catch you skulking after me, you'll have chosen your true form: a rat to the end of your days.”

Smeegulped.
The Dark One pivoted on his cane to saunter lopsidedly toward the lights of the fair. “Remember to pick up that box you dropped.”

Emma counted up the child-sized shirts she was bundling. If she'd thought to ask earlier where the Lost Boys got their clothing, she might have persuaded Tink to sparkle up something for the ladies as well. Too late now with the jingling fairy still nowhere to be found. With nothing to change into after they slid through the lightning sand to the cave Inigo swore was beside the pit, she'd be sitting in grit. According to her school teacher mother, dry lightning sand was extremely fine and loosely packed—otherwise no one would sink through it—so at least her skin wouldn't be scraped raw.

All around Emma, grownups and kids were rushing around, carrying out their assigned tasks. Neal's announcement they were playing the overnight version of Hide 'n' Seek had brought even the youngest into line. Thank goodness he understands the boys so well.

Craning her head back, Emma saw her long-ago lover still hovering above them. As the only camp member recently sprinkled with fairy dust, his lookout duties were key. Odd that the threat of zombies had stoked Neal's ability to fly. Could it be that his happiest thought now was being needed?

“How close?” she shouted.

“At the rate they're lurching, I'd say not more than twenty minutes.”

Before Emma could answer, Mary-Margaret called out, “Everyone hear that? Let's wrap it up and head to the sandpit.” That voice had rallied peasants to attack King George's army and fourth graders to troop in from recess. Tonight, its authoritative ring called together two dozen terrified kids and adults lugging hastily packed necessities.

That's my Mom. Emma patted her jacket, assuring herself the enchanted compass was still secure. She just hoped Inigo's idea wasn't more dangerous than facing zombies.

Archie hunched forward, gripping the steering wheel of his Audi hatchback, trying to catch his breath. Ahead a solitary street lamp illuminated Vincent. His unbelievably flesh-and-blood friend was leaning against his rented Prius, tall and lanky in a beige trench coat. For a second time, Archie's light turned green, yet he remained braked with the engine running, unable to drive the last two blocks between them.

Vincent's words echoed in his mind: I know why you didn't want me to come, and it's okay. Your secret is safe with me.

After years of repeating to Pinocchio the Blue Fairy's admonition to be selfless, brave, and true, Archie knew himself to be a hypocrite. The interests of Storybrooke be damned, he'd pursued a relationship with an outsider. Now he wasn't brave enough to face whatever truth his friend had deduced. Had Vincent realized that the town had been flung to earth by a curse from another dimension? That his beloved fairy tales were the inhabitants' life stories? That his memory of a college roommate named Archie was fake, but the absurdity that Archie had spent six decades as an ageless cricket was real?

I just don't know what to do.

Then Vincent saw him. At first, he cocked his head as if making sure. Then he waved.

Archie sucked in a lungful of air. He put his car in drive. The light turned red, and he stepped on the
gas. My secret is safe with Vince, he assured himself as he closed the distance. Parking on the opposite side of the street, he hopped out.

“Arch!”

When Vincent strode across the pavement to greet him, Archie backed up against the side of his car. In person, his friend looked even more handsome than his photos—steel-gray hair, well-tanned skin, sky blue eyes dancing with intelligence and humor. For an instant, he deplored his own fluffy red hair. Then a solid bear hug enveloped him. An instant later, Vincent was holding him at arm’s length, inspecting him up and down.

“Arch, you look the same.”

Is Vince still talking about our shared memories? “But—but—but what about—”

Smiling, Vincent shook his head. “The same old Arch—right down to the shy stammer.”

“If you could just—just—” Archie moistened his lips. “Just tell me… how—how do you know my—my secret?”

“It wasn't hard to figure out: small isolated town, doesn't quite fit into the twenty-first century.” The skin around Vincent's eyes crinkled affectionately. “Nobody in Storybrooke knows you're gay.”

At the foot of the community center's front steps, Mr. Gold stood waiting for Belle. He'd chosen a spot sufficiently off to the side to not intimidate anyone needing to enter or exit. Chin up, jacket hanging straight from his shoulders, a half-inch of black pinstriped shirt showing below the cuffs, cane centered in front of him, hands draped across the handle, well-polished toes pointing straight ahead—he was prepared to hold on until she called for him.

He could have stationed himself by the side entrance where they'd enjoyed the kiss he thought they'd never share again. But Belle had had other plans. With a silly excuse, she'd asked him to wait in front. He knew what she was hoping for: one more person who didn't detest him to chance by and say hello.

Mr. Gold quirked the side of his mouth. Fulfillment of Belle's wish was less likely than the frustrated butcher jumping him with a meat cleaver.

My past is trickier to navigate than the Fire Swamp—sink holes prepared to suck him under, flame spouts ready to blow up in his face, and monstrous rats everywhere. Would Belle approve of how he’d resolved the latest threat? Unlikely. And he'd do everything he could to make sure she never found out. But still… he wished he could tell her she'd been in his thoughts the entire time. Indeed, he'd given Mr. Smee a fright. But for Belle's sake, he'd been scrupulous about not causing any harm that couldn't be undone.

If I scared that would-be rogue away from attempting another clumsy crime, I'll have done him a favor.

Mr. Gold's lips twitched in a smile. Then a twinge in his bad leg made him wince. Lifting his gaze, he watched the gray clouds piling on the horizon like heaps of wool at shearing time. Soon, they would blanket the sky. Before the evening was over, rain would fall. He didn't need magic to know that—just an old injury he couldn't undo.

Mr. Gold leaned forward on his cane. Oblivious to the menacing weather, visitors still swarmed the rows of vendors, games, and refreshment stands. Without Belle, he would never brave such a throng.
In Storybrooke, he dreaded a stray foot catching his cane and sending him sprawling. In the Enchanted Forest, his abhorrence of crowds had stemmed from something worse—his unnatural awareness of the desperation in everyone's heart. Before he acquired his protective cloak, the call of the mob's raw, frantic, ravening desires had been unnerving.

And the mob abhorred me right back. He'd always suspected it was the disquieting knowledge that his power could fulfill those desires—no matter how unspeakable, no matter how depraved—that had made people fear, hate, and scorn him.

But Storybrooke? This new world offered the chance for something different. Since he'd steeped the town in the Charming family's true love magic, only a few desperate souls had asked him to use it—and their requests had been on the side of goodness and light. Even Regina's demand had been to help Henry.

Mr. Gold sighed. The only dark desire he'd indulged since he regained his magic had been his own.

His gaze roved over the mass of fair-goers. To undo the harm done by the wraith, he needed to brew more true love potion. He had a good feeling about the samples he'd pocketed from Skyr and Polly. If their test was positive, the odds their romance faced would make their assay glow brighter. If he could identify just a few more promising couples, Emma and Snow White could come back home. By now they were probably thoroughly bored with their stay in the deserted Enchanted Forest.

Staring at the spot where Inigo had disappeared into the lightning sand, watching the extra rope uncoil, Snow wondered if his whole plan wasn't crazy. That this pit lay next to an empty underground chamber was hard to picture, but the fact Inigo had emerged to tell the tale was proof of that. What she questioned was the feasibility of pulling two dozen boys and grownups through the pit of sand into that chamber before zombies engulfed them. So many things had to be right—Inigo's estimate of the length of rope necessary to make a pulley, the boys' skill at holding their breath, and Peter Pan's evaluation of how long it would take the zombies to stagger their way into the clearing.

And so many things can go wrong. A boy might panic, exhale his air, and forget to protect his head before the last upturn that would lead to Inigo and safety. The rope might snag or fray against something rough. Or a zombie might see them disappear and lead the mob into the sandpit after them.

Snow glanced at Mulan, Tootles, and Nibs ranged along the loop of rope, ready to start the pulley moving—just as soon as Inigo established the other end. She chewed her lip. How long? Then the roped jerked twice.

Her soldier friend squared her shoulders. “That's the signal! Inigo's in place. Alfie's first.”

Luckily, the youngest of the group was also the most daring. Without being asked, he threaded his belt through one of the metal rings Inigo had tied onto the pulley. Snow snatched the next wet cloth off her stack and prepared to wrap it around his head.

“Deep breath.”

“I used to swim with mermaids, right?”

Snow watched Alfie suck air until his cheeks looked like a chipmunk's. Quickly, she swathed his face and pushed the ends into his left hand and placed his right on the rope. “Hold tight.”

Emma swung him into the pit, and Mulan yanked the rope to signal Inigo. Then she and her Lost Boy team pulled hand-over-hand, and the lightning sand swallowed Alfie. A few seconds later, there
was a double jerk from the other end.

*It worked!* “Inigo's got him!” Snow said. “Next up, Curly.”

Chapter End Notes

To me, the Dark One's ability to know someone's deepest, darkest desire is one of his most interesting powers. It also makes for a good story that he's most likely to be fooled when the lie concerns something or someone he loves.

More to come!
Belle changes her outfit.
Mr. Gold changes someone else's outfit.
Smee had his mind changed for him.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold): I'm a fan of true love, dearie. And, more importantly, what it creates (A Land Without Magic).

Belle studied herself in the mirror on the ladies' dressing room door: midnight blue blazer with gray stitching; froth of red ruffled blouse showing at the throat; cobalt blue skirt with red and gray bands in a diagonal plaid; Oxford blue stockings; and gray, wedge-heeled ankle boots. She hoped the first outfit she'd bought with her own money would meet with Rumple's approval.

Whatever the verdict, Belle was glad she'd changed. After six weeks in conveniently short skirts, she had found wearing her gorgeous yellow gown awkward. As she draped the seventy-inch garment bag over her arm, she realized it might be even more awkward to carry. Rumple would be driving them to Pinocchio's party. She could ask to stop at her place to drop off her dress. Tonight was as good a night as any to show off the cute loft that came with her librarian job.

Belle gathered Rumple's dozen roses from the dressing table and buried her nose in their fragrance. Be honest! Tonight's the perfect night.

Humming “When the Nightingale Sings,” she exited the dressing room and started up the hall back to Rumple.

At the far end, where the hall emptied into the foyer, was that Mr. Smee? Such an odd fellow—part hooligan, part puppy dog. Running into him was always awkward. Ever since she'd made up with her father, Mr. Smee had seen her as his resource: What could he do to get a raise from Moe? What was the best way to ask Moe for a day off? What would it take for Moe to trust him with a key to the cash register?

Belle grimaced. Certainly, she'd forgiven Mr. Smee, but she still found it hard chatting with a man whose introduction had been a kerchief soaked in chloroform.

As Belle was considering whether to slip out the side door she heard footsteps. Glancing back, she saw Jefferson. Just the man she did want to see. With the proper nudge, Rumple would renew their acquaintance. Making the effort to cheer up his old colleague would do him good, too.

Turning, Belle asked, “Remember me?”

“I remember.” Jefferson stopped so close that she had to tilt her head to see his face. “You were supposed to tell Mr. Gold that Regina locked you up. I've never killed anybody. I thought he would.”
Kill Regina? Is that why you set me free? To stir up Rumple? Belle swallowed. “Revenge has a way of hitting wide of the mark.”

“Revenge?” Jefferson's eyebrows rose. “Rumplestiltskin doesn't do revenge. He settles accounts. He guarantees equity. He makes things right.”

Jefferson opened his eyes so wide Belle began to see why they called the hatter mad. Nervously, she wondered whether she should beckon Mr. Smee. Then she noticed a wad of white cloth under Jefferson's arm: a bunny suit. Fifth-grader Paige had worn it when she'd led a group of kindergartners in a rousing rendition of “Here Comes Peter Cottontail.” Belle's apprehension melted into sympathy. She remembered how tenderly Jefferson had hugged the stuffed animal his daughter had touched. “Has Rumple known you a long time?”

Jefferson stared down at her. Then he nodded. “Since the day I was born. My mother was miscarrying. Rumplestiltskin reached inside and plucked me out.”

Belle's breath caught. “Oh.”

“My father told me the secret of my birth when I was twelve—after he caught me telling a scary story to the cook's son about the Dark One making jackets out of children's hides.”

“Hmm. Seems I heard that one myself.” Belle's first day as housekeeper, for one horrible moment, Rumple had led her to believe the grisly rumor was true—until he admitted he was joking. At the time, she'd been serving tea. That's when she'd chipped his cup.

“Don't believe everything people tell you.” Jefferson's brows drew together, and his somber dark eyes seemed to lose their focus. “Just… don’t.”

From the distraction on the young man's face, Belle wondered whether his mind had drifted elsewhere altogether. She was no longer sure Rumple could cheer him up—short of conjuring another wraith to steal the Evil Queen's soul. Still… “Come with me. Rumple's waiting out front. You should say hello.”

Jefferson slipped the bunny suit from under his arm and dangled it by its ears. “I promised Grace I'd bring her costume before she leaves. She's staying with the neighbors—the ones I asked to mind her the day I took Regina to Wonderland. They're looking after her until I…” he dropped his chin, resting it on the thick scarf that swathed his neck “…get my head on straight.”

Grace. That must be Paige's Enchanted Forest name. I'm fortunate I only have one identity. With her father's years lost in Wonderland plus twenty-nine years of separation in Storybrooke, Jefferson's daughter had spent more of her life as the neighbors' little girl than she'd spent as his.

Mumbling a farewell, Jefferson edged past Belle to the side door. Without looking back, he said, “After. Maybe after. If you think Rumplestiltskin wouldn't mind.”

“Of course he wouldn't. That would be lovely if—”

The door closed behind Jefferson before Belle could finish her sentence. Glancing up the hall, she saw Mr. Smee's eyes center on her. He stuck his hands in his pockets and ambled forward. Did she have time to slip out the side door after the despondent ex-wizard? No. Not without being rude. She hiked the garment bag up to her shoulder for easier carrying, resigning herself to sorting out whatever was on Mr. Smee's mind now.
Mr. Gold knew that when pain radiated from his old injury until his entire leg ached, the best relief was work. Waiting for Belle at the edge of the fair, unsure how much longer she would be, he had but one task available to him: surveying the crowd for couples truly in love.

At first he evaluated the odd pair hanging by the candle concession as unlikely to yield the magic he required. Leroy the handyman liked to help out at these charity events. If the conversation between him and the young nun Astrid didn't relate to the fair, then it related to their Enchanted Forest identities. A miner of fairy diamonds chatting with a dispenser of fairy dust was nothing out of the ordinary. His attention moved on to the families playing quoits.

Then Mr. Gold heard Astrid giggle. The sound was as delighted as a chirping sparrow. Turning his head, he saw Leroy lift his bearded chin and whisper in the nun's ear.

*My, my. Is Grumpy flirting?*

Twisting on his good leg, Mr. Gold repositioned his cane. These two deserved a closer look.

Astrid whispered back to Leroy. His answer brought another giggle. When she playfully tapped his wrist, he grabbed her hand. They stole away to stand by the red-leafed maple just beyond the last booth.

*Promising.* Mr. Gold recalled the one and only conversation he'd had with Leroy in Storybrooke: over whether it was worth his while to buy the latter's derelict boat. The asking price—forgiving the convent one month's rent—had surprised Mr. Gold but it hadn't interested him. The prospect of evicting Mother Superior Reul Gorm out on her ass had been far more appealing. Now he understood the real reason for Leroy's offer: Astrid.

Did this pair warrant testing? A handyman and a nun, a dwarf and a fairy—any way one looked at it, their odds were long indeed.

Abruptly, Leroy dropped Astrid's hand and shrank back. He removed his dark wool cap, baring his bald head. “Uh, hello, Sister—uh, Mother, uh, Ma'am.”

Mr. Gold clutched his cane. *There she goes—the head bitch herself.* He couldn't set his eyes on Reul Gorm without seeing the horror of Baelfire falling away from him through her treacherous vortex. After Pinocchio's confession Monday, Mr. Gold knew she'd instigated his desperate deception as well.

And now Reul Gorm had appeared from behind the maple to insinuate herself between a gawky fairy and a lonely dwarf. Instead of leaving them be—allowing their spark of magic to develop into something *useful*—she was belittling them with one of her patronizing smiles. When she spoke, she took no care to keep her opinions confidential. From fifty feet away, Mr. Gold could hear each syrupy word.

“In our homeland, Leroy, you made the honorable choice—to allow Astrid to be what she was meant to be. Now you must act selflessly again. So long as we are sojourners in this wanton world, Astrid's role is to be a nun. She's under a vow of chastity, and—”

“That vow's an implanted memory! I'm not a nun. I'm a fairy.”

When Astrid stuck out her chin, Leroy ducked his so far down he buried his beard in his jacket collar—but he didn't jump to Reul Gorm's side.

*Even more promising*, thought Mr. Gold.
“Oh, child.” Reul Gorm’s smile grew pitying. “That’s further reason to choose nobly. A fairy’s calling is higher than pleasing one single creature. As a good fairy, your mission is to ensure everyone’s happiness.”

Astrid clasped her hands against her chest. “How can I help others be happy if I’m unhappy?”

With growing satisfaction, Mr. Gold saw Reul Gorm fold her arms tightly against her chest. Not used to being contradicted, are you, dearie?

Clearly scrabbling for lost ground, Reul Gorm returned her attention to Leroy. “Being in Storybrooke has confused Astrid. It’s up to you to be strong and not abandon your calling. Only the pure of heart can mine fairy diamonds.”

Leroy twisted his wool cap.

Astrid swept her arm across his shoulders. “What’s impure about true love? It’s the highest calling of all.”

Bravo! Mr. Gold would have applauded—if the risk of his throbbing leg buckling under him wasn’t requiring him to grip his cane with both hands.

Reul Gorm leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Astrid. “Surely, child, the curse hasn’t so corrupted your conscience that you would want your behavior to be a stumbling block to your sister nuns.”

“We’re not actually nuns! How would my behavior—”

Through clenched teeth, Reul Gorm snapped, “So long as you’re dressed like a nun, you’ll act like a nun.”

The clothing is the issue? I’ll remedy that. Mr. Gold lifted one hand off his cane, leaning all his weight on the other. Pink? Yes. Polka-dots? Indeed. He twisted his wrist and, with a grand flourish, enveloped Astrid in a swirl of purple mist. When it vanished, her drab navy-blue habit had transformed into a fluffy pink dress topped with a white Angora sweater and a string of pink pearls. In consideration of the cold, he’d wrapped her legs in silky white tights. For Leroy’s sake, he’d made her shoes pink flats laced with burgundy ribbons.

Astrid gasped. Her eyes widened as she drank in the sight of her new clothes. Leroy stared, then whipped around, hunting for the source of the makeover. When his eyes locked on the vicinity’s only caster of magic, Mr. Gold inclined his head. Leroy’s mouth opened. Then slowly his surprise became a wondering grin.

Gratifying, thought Mr. Gold. But not as gratifying as the twitch in Reul Gorm’s cheek when her eyes met his.

Belle would never have thought Mr. Smee a man interested in the color of a woman’s dress. How much cleavage it displayed, yes, but not the color. Rumple was different, of course. Despite how guarded he was about his past, she knew he’d been a spinner and weaver of threads and yarns before he became a wizard. Take any shade, and he could name the roots, berries, barks, and clays that would make it. As she gazed bemusedly out the community center’s glass front door—enjoying the spectacle of Astrid twirling in her new party frock—Belle wondered whether Rumple’s creation had required both of his specialties.
“That dress isn't yellow either,” she said aloud. “It's pink, positively pink.”

When Belle looked back over her shoulder, she saw that Mr. Smee had disappeared from the lobby. Definitely an odd fellow. The fact she'd changed out of her yellow gown had made him happy—nearly as happy as changing out of her nun's habit had made the erstwhile fairy racing toward Rumple.

Oh, no! Belle dropped her garment bag and pushed the door open to dash outside. Astrid was running to hug Rumple. Not that a hug would harm him—if anything, he needed dozens of spontaneous hugs—but Belle had seen how the moist air was hurting his leg. If she didn't reach him quickly, Astrid would knock him over.

“Rumple!” Belle hurried down the steps and linked elbows with him, bracing him just as Astrid wrapped her arms around his neck. The hug lasted a second. Then the fairy hopped back to swing her skirt from side to side. Belle caught her eye. “You look adorable.”

Leroy, or Grumpy—or was he Dreamy again?—strolled up and clasped Astrid's hand. “Like she's ready to float away.”

Belle looked at Rumple. He'd tucked his chin down and narrowed his eyes as if wary of misinterpreting the reactions to his intervention. She squeezed his arm. He released his breath and returned a half-smile.

Glancing over, Belle saw Leroy give Rumple a measuring look. “I thought you didn't like nuns.”

“Not particularly,” Rumple replied. “Nor fairies either. But I do like young ladies who speak their minds.”

A sudden grin lifted Leroy's whiskers. “You and me both, brother.”

Astrid giggled and tapped her feet. Belle pressed her cheek to Rumple's shoulder.

Slowly, Leroy's eyebrows drew together. “What's your price?”

Belle felt Rumple tense. Couldn't anyone trust him? She twisted her head to read his face. He was still smiling, though the warmth didn't reach his eyes. They were staring past the dwarf and fairy, offering a challenge to someone in the crowd. Following his gaze, Belle glimpsed Reul Gorm disappearing around the side of the popcorn wagon.

“No price,” Rumple said in his most pleasant voice. “I've already been well paid.”

When Smee had jacked the gardener's truck that morning, he'd immediately dumped everything except the handcart. He'd switched the license plates for a pair from a junked Oldsmobile and disguised the shiny red paint under a layer of dirt. That's why now he could sit in the packed community center parking lot as jolly as an oyster. Because Smee, when allowed to do what Smee did best, knew how to acquire a hard-to-find object and cover his tracks. Wasn't the bag of fairy dust he'd stowed in the forest under the toll bridge proof of his ingenuity?

But acquiring people? That was outside his bailiwick. Moe had talked him into nabbing Belle by insisting it was for her own good. The Dark One's retaliation after Smee made that exception had proved his rule: he was a procurer, more a middle-man type.
Smiling at the object cradled in his lap, Smee felt sure he'd dodged cannon fire tonight. Abduct Miss Belle away from the Dark One? What had he been thinking? Thank goodness he'd toured the booths one last time. That's when he'd discovered the mystery grab bag table and—joy of joys—that one grab bag was yellow. After the vendor was looking the other way, Smee had had to reach over the head of a little girl to snatch it first. But once he'd laid hands on it, he'd had nothing but smooth sailing.

“You can show yourself,” Smee announced to the biscuit tin sitting on the dashboard. When the lid began to rise, he presented the bag. “Got it. Where you want me to take it?”

The tin opened wider. “That's not the package. You had it in your sights then you lost it.”

Smee heard a dyspeptic gurgle in his stomach.

“The package is no longer wrapped in yellow. It's now wrapped in blue, red, and gray.”

Smee felt bile rise in his throat. He choked it back down.

“Tonight, without fail,” said the wickedly gentle voice as the light burned hotter and hotter, “if you do not want your nose, your lips, and your cheeks seared off your face, you will hijack Belle French to Neverland.”

Chapter End Notes

With fan fiction, we can write scenes we think *should* have been in the show. I didn't need a whole 'nother Dreamy-Nova episode but I would have liked to see them get together after the curse broke. :D
In a Most Unexpected Way

Chapter Summary

Snow jumps.
Archie is afraid to jump.
Emma refuses to jump.
Mr. Gold makes someone else jump.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mary-Margaret Blanchard (Snow White): Why can't you just listen to me? (Lady of the Lake).

Snow answered the stony look on Emma's face by crossing her arms. Everyone in harm's way had slid through the lightning sand to safety. Peter Pan, circling above them, didn't count. With zombies smashing up the Lost Boys camp just beyond the narrow strip of swamp cypress, her daughter needed to stop being pigheaded.

So Snow brought out the big guns. “I'm your mother. Hook up to the rope. When I say go, you go.”

“You're one year older than me,” Emma answered. “Don't treat me like a baby.”

But you are my baby. Snow waffled. Was her essential motherly duty protecting her daughter or promoting her independence? Hard to decide considering how little experience she had and what a distracting racket the zombies were making. She winced at the clatter as another lean-to became rubble.

Then, with a whoosh, Peter lit down beside her daughter. “You first, Snow. Emma and I have been in tight spots before. I've got her back and she's got mine.”

Three days ago Emma said you stole her youth, her self-respect, and her sanity. Now you say you've got her back?

But her daughter nodded at Peter's words, adding, “We know how the other thinks. We're a team.”

The marvel of Peter's taming of the ROUS flashed into Snow's mind. He and her daughter had certainly made a dazzling duo.

“And the quicker you go,” Peter added, picking up the rope, “the quicker I can send Emma after you.”

The clamor from the camp was lessening—not a good sign. Nodding, Snow threaded her belt through the nearest ring on the pulley. She peeled another wet cloth off her stack, checked that two were left, then blew out her breath. She inhaled deeply, expanding her lungs, pushing out her chest and lifting her shoulders to create the largest capacity possible.

With one last look at Emma, then at the sandpit, Snow slapped the wet cloth around her head and grasped the ends. Utter darkness. Without waiting another second, she grabbed the rope with her other hand and leapt.
Immediately, the fine sand slid up Snow's pant legs and shirt as she sped at a downward angle into the pit. She recalled Inigo's instructions. *Feet first, feet first.* As fast as she could, she maneuvered to grasp the rope in front of her with her knees and aimed the soles of her boots in the direction of travel. That was the only way to avoid some more delicate part of her body hitting the rock where the opening to the next chamber angled upwards.

For another second, the sand rushed past her. Then boom, her boots struck rock. The pulley stopped moving. She let go of the rope, groped with one hand for the entry to their safe haven and ducked her head into it. To go up, she angled her feet down. Once she could feel the sides of the spout-like passage Inigo had described, she tugged the rope twice again.

*How long have I been holding my breath?* she thought as she sped upwards.

In the next instant, hands dug under Snow's armpits and yanked her out. She ripped the sand-crusted cloth off her head and gasped for air. The light from the lone cattail torch seemed blinding.

“No... time... Get my belt... off... signal Emma.”

When Nibs and Tootles set Snow's feet on the chamber floor, she stumbled. On hands and knees, she scrabbled around, blinking until her eyes adjusted to see Inigo, Mulan, and Aurora lined up along the pulley. Staggering to her feet, she stared at the two lengths of rope, one leading into the sand-filled spout and one leading out.

*Come on, Emma.*

The rope twitched twice, and her three comrades started pulling. Relief flooded Snow. Then she realized the half of the pulley going into the sand wasn't moving.

“Something's wrong,” Inigo muttered. Then he and the two women toppled back like dominoes. They'd pulled the rope clean out with no one attached.

Snow dropped to her knees. *Emma! She was still in the clearing—with the zombies*

---

Archie had been so relieved that Vincent didn't know Storybrooke's secret, that all he could do was hug him. Now he was driving his Audi slowly up Main Street, checking his rear-view repeatedly to make sure he hadn't lost his friend. He'd chosen a circuitous route that avoided passing the bustling fair or taking any street Pinocchio on his motorcycle or Geppetto in his pickup might use to return to their waterfront home. If they saw him, they might suspect his call about missing the party with a headache had been an excuse.

A glance in his mirror told Archie the blue Prius was still there. To keep faith with the town, all he had to do was entertain Vincent through noon Saturday—so late that his only hope of making his lecture would be speeding out of Storybrooke straight to the Maine Folklife Center in Orono.

Archie's house held nothing to give the truth away—no swords etched with elf runes, no tankards made of dwarf gold, no dragon heads mounted on plaques. His Enchanted Forest talismans were a cricket-sized top hat and a cricket-sized umbrella. If Vincent chanced to see them lying on his mantle, explaining them away would be easy.

His refrigerator did hold a jug of Granny's Best Homestyle Honey Mead, but his friend would find that interesting. The rest of the items—free range eggs, local cheddar curd, window sill-grown basil, chanterelle mushrooms he'd picked in the forest, and fresh halibut fillets—might pique Vincent's
appetite but not his curiosity.

His worries fading, Archie found himself whistling “From a Distance” to a jaunty beat. How Vincent had found Storybrooke, he couldn't guess, but it made him ecstatic. He hadn't had such a friend since the age he looked in the Mardi Gras photo—not since Charlie. As a puppeteer in his parents' traveling show, Archie had been the perfect match for Charlie the Puppet Maker. Together, they'd planned to tour the realms in search of grander stages. Then his mother had come down with palpitations and his father with lumbago. Stay with us! they'd moaned. Just until we die. Years later, after the only death had been of his dreams, his parents had snickered that their complaints had been lies—a swindle the con masters had perpetrated on their own son. By that time, Charlie had found a different best friend.

With Vincent, Archie had a second chance.

He turned a corner. Seconds later, the Prius reappeared in his rear-view mirror. He winked his lights off and on. Tonight would be fantastic. Even after taking precautions, disguising identities, substituting earth versions for Enchanted Forest stories, and holding back the really bad stuff—Archie still had much to share with Vincent. But the first thing he'd have to do when they reached his home was clear up one central misunderstanding.

“I'm not gay,” Archie said aloud.

Emma needs me! Snow sprang to her feet.

But before she could take a step towards the opening from the underground chamber to the sandpit that would lead her to her daughter, Mulan grabbed her wrist. “You can't go up there. Not now. You'll endanger us all.”

Snow wrenched herself free. Immediately, her soldier companion gripped her arms. Inigo sprang up and together both of them wrestled Snow, kicking and wriggling, back down to the cave’s floor.

Mulan's pale face looked grave in the flickering glow of the cattail torch. Gritting her teeth, Snow glared at her. “Emma made another agreement with you, didn't she? Like before she went up the beanstalk.”

Mulan nodded. “Emma said that if any zombies entered the clearing before she jumped, she'd release herself from the rope—so she wouldn't lead the horde into our midst. And if you tried to interfere, she asked me to stop you.”

Typical! Snow twisted and jerked her body, but she couldn't escape Mulan and Inigo. In her mind's eye, she saw Emma doing the same—except that the hands clutching her were bone and rotting flesh. “My daughter's risking her life—just like she did with the giant—and you expect me to let her do that alone?”

“Nobody wants their loved one facing peril without them. But this time is different.” Mulan leaned closer. “She's not with Hook. She's with someone she trusts.”

Defeated, Snow slumped. Inigo turned his restraining hold into a hug. “We have to trust them both.”

When Ruby turned from the grill and saw the next person in line, her back tensed. Most of the customers at Granny's charity hamburger concession this evening had been friendly faces, but half a
dozen she'd recognized from the mob that had cornered her two nights before. She didn't know the name of the burly man trying to stare her down, but she remembered the pitchfork he'd jabbed in her direction.

If Ruby had been in wolf form, she'd have growled and bared her fangs. Lacking those defenses, she stood as tall as she could and brought out her perkiest smile. "Would you like to order?" If King George's flunky had something else in mind, she wasn't sure what she'd do.

The oversized thug smirked. "Wolf burger. That's what I'm hankering for."

Ruby chewed her lip. She'd been so busy flipping patties, she had no idea whether the clapboard and canvas dining tent held any potential allies. Dave the Dove's imposing presence was known to stop trouble, but he'd already come and gone with Polly. August had poked his head in but just long enough to show off a black eye and promise to tell her about it at his party. Even Granny was elsewhere—out back dumping trash. Ruby cast her gaze around the crowded tables. Of the strangers left, had any more come to jeer at her?

The man leaned closer. "In fact, I've heard the meat is extra—" The next word became a gurgle, and he clutched his throat.

"There, now," said a silky voice. "Finding that last word difficult to swallow?"

The gagging man doubled up over the counter. Behind him Ruby saw Mr. Gold—one hand grasping his cane, the other clenched in the air. Her first reaction was delight: Another bully faced on his own terms. Her second was alarm. "Mr. Gold! He looks purple. I think you—"

"—have taught this young man a valuable lesson." The wizard released his supernatural choke hold then straightened his peacock-blue tie.

Wheezing, the would-be tough guy peered over his shoulder.

Mr. Gold raised his eyebrows in mock sympathy. "Always chew your words carefully before you say them."

His mouth clamped shut, the man hastily nodded and sidled toward the exit. When Granny passed him, she frowned. When she caught sight of Mr. Gold, her frown deepened.

Ruby pursed her lips. More trouble to head off. "I'm in your debt, Mr. Gold. Our menu's limited tonight, but I'll make you the best burger and fries you've ever had."

"Make that order double."

Ruby grinned. "Belle's first hamburger. This is an occasion."

"Indeed." Mr. Gold surveyed the tent. "She's tucking her ball gown in my car. I came ahead to secure a place, but it looks as though—"

Granny marched up. "—all the seats are taken. Try the chicken stand."

Ruby grimaced. What's her beef? "I've got it." Grabbing an order placard and a bar rag, she rounded the counter to the only unoccupied table. As she scooped up wrappers and napkins, she glanced at Mr. Gold. Despite leaning so heavily on his cane that his left foot barely touched the plank floor, he seemed to flinch with each step.

When he reached her, he paused. "Perhaps—perhaps I should stand at the entrance. To watch for
Belle.”

Ruby shrugged and set the plastic 42 card on the table. Then she caught Mr. Gold's eyes flicking between the rickety metal chairs. *So that's the problem.* She cocked her head. “I'm afraid you *have* to sit. Otherwise someone'll steal your table.” Before he could object, she braced the closest chair firmly against the pine boards that formed the tent's wall. “This'll give you a perfect view.”

Mr. Gold's eyebrows drew together. Then he murmured, “Debt repaid.”

Smiling, Ruby strode to the counter. “Two specials with everything on them.”

Granny glowered. “I charge extra for the pickles.”

Chapter End Notes

On the show, what happened to the friendship between Ruby and Belle? Meghan Ory guest-starred on the episode with her wedding, but she wasn't a guest!
Darker Than You Can Imagine

Chapter Summary

Zombies.
Canapes.
Strands of hair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jiminy Cricket (Dr. Hopper): Wait! Revenge is not the answer. No. It's going to change you (Heart of Darkness).

Emma stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Neal in front of the sandpit. The six zombies that had blundered into the clearing after she'd hooked up to—then hastily unhooked from—the rope were lurching forward at such an ominously slow pace, she wanted to scream. Her previous skirmish had been in a thicket of trees where she, Mary-Margaret, and Mulan could lunge, dart into safety, and attack from behind. This time they'd been forced to make their stand in the open.

Glancing sidelong, Emma noted twinkling lines of fairy dust fanning from Neal's eyes and across his cheeks—tracings of where laughter had creased his face just a couple of hours before. A touch of sparkle still clung to his vintage felt coat, his shaggy brown hair, and the stubble on his chin, but with a frown as grim as his, she doubted he could fly.

“Steady, now,” he murmured. “Don't strike until they're so close we can smell them.”

Emma nodded. She prayed the horde still racketing around the Lost Boys' camp didn't join them.

In the last few minutes, the wind had risen, ripping the clouds into tatters, letting the waning moon shine through. By its light, she could see the emptiness in the monsters' eyes that confirmed they were corpse-puppets, not people. Despite her near decade in law enforcement, she'd never sent a bullet into something that moved, but if an ogre hadn't crushed her Glock-17 into a paperweight a couple of days after they fell through Jefferson's hat-portal, she'd have kept firing until each gaping face was mush.

No such luck. Any chance of re-arming was another dimension away. Emma had to rely on her lady sword. She tightened her grip on the bumps and ridges of the rose-embossed hilt. The blade was shorter than the weapon she'd lost down the ravine, but she'd honed the edge to slicing perfection.

The enchanted compass felt cold between her breasts. Why hadn't she had the common sense to hand it to Mary-Margret before her mother escaped to safety down the sandpit? According to Hook, Cora already had the means to breach universes to reach Storybrooke. If her zombies snatched the compass, she'd be able to find her way there as well.

“I won't let her get it,” Emma breathed.

The first two zombies staggered nearer. From their tattered blouses and bandanas, she guessed they'd once been pirates in Hook's crew. The stench of rotting flesh made her gag. When one hulking
cadaver raised an arm to cross cutlasses, Neal whispered, “Now!” and cleaved the skull with one quick swipe.

Riveting her gaze on the second one's decomposing face, Emma recalled her mother's words: *A shout gives a strong exhalation on the hit. That increases focus and intensifies the force of the blow.* Ignoring the daggers clenched in the zombie's bony hands, Emma shrieked and plunged her sword into the eye. The zombie went limp. Gritting her teeth, she jerked her sword back and forth. The putrid arms flopped like a marionette's, but she couldn't wrench her weapon free. Without warning, the third zombie lunged. When its spiked poleaxe was within inches of her arm, Neal lopped off its head.

Gore sprayed across Emma's jacket. She groaned. Finally, the zombie she'd stabbed slid off her blade. Neal reached out to steady her. Clutching his shoulder, she stared at the three zombies still advancing. Instead of the walking dead, they were the stumbling dead—banging their shins against the three already felled, then tottering back to try again.

“Like a glitch in a really sick video game,” Neal muttered.

When the zombies' third attempt didn't work, they turned to maneuver around the obstacle. Emma's thoughts raced. So *Cora doesn't control them moment-by-moment. She animates them and lets them go. That makes her toys predictable.*

Sheathing her sword, Emma dropped to a crouch and pried the daggers from the cold, dead hands. “Neal, let's move.” She jumped the corpse and ran to a nearby boulder. The night before, Inigo had used it to show off his fencing. Stashing her new weapons in her jacket, Emma scuttled over it. Tonight, she'd show off a few moves of her own.

Safely on the other side of the boulder, Emma turned around. When she saw Neal still beside the pit, slashing at a gangly zombie dressed like a farmer, she moaned. When the monster's axe clanked against his cutlass, she flinched. Then Neal hacked off the weapon-wielding hand and came dashing to her with the zombies lurching in slow but relentless pursuit behind him.

In a single bound, Neal cleared the boulder. A glittering wisp trailed after him.

Emma squeezed his elbow. “Hurrah for fairy dust!”

Of all the absurdly heartening things he could have done, he winked.

*Same old Neal.*

Emma grabbed a dagger from her jacket. As she'd hoped, the zombies seemed fixated on lumbering straight toward them despite the barrier. On their first bump, she picked her target. On their second, she flicked the dagger, sending it straight into a vacantly staring eye. As the cadaver collapsed, she drew the other dagger. *Ready, aim...* At the zombies' third bump, she let it fly.

“Bull's-eye!” *Practicing darts at Granny's wasn't a waste of time after all.*

As the last zombie turned to totter around the boulder, Neal flew over it and sent his cutlass straight down the monster's throat. He dropped out of sight for a moment and popped up holding both daggers.

Before Emma's heartbeat had time to slow to normal, Neal swooped back to her, looped an arm around her waist, and shot up into the night. The sudden ascent tickled her tummy. Air whooshed past her ears. She grinned. *My boyfriend is Peter Pan. He can fly.*
They weren't done with the zombies—not if the bangs, clangs, and crashes coming from the camp were any clue—but at least they had breathing space to devise a plan.

*When I see Mary-Margaret again, she owes me a lollipop.*

Balancing a tray of crab cakes, coconut shrimp, and trout canapés on one hand and swinging an ice bucket of cold drinks from the other, Pinocchio made the rounds of his dad's ground floor.

*Not a bad turnout,* he thought. Especially for someone who'd been sent out of the Enchanted Forest at age seven. The boys and girls he'd played with then were children still, their development arrested until Emma's arrival in Storybrooke had jump-started time. The couple dozen adults greeting him, grinning at him, and grabbing his hors d'oeuvres, he'd met the last year of the curse. Since they'd been amnesic about their former lives, he'd kept his true origins a secret. This evening, they couldn't stop ribbing him about it.

As Pinocchio left the crowded living room to cross the entry, a jolly voice called out, “Hey, watch where you're pointing that nose of yours. You nearly poked my eye out.”

Pinocchio flicked his glance upward. “Since I stopped pretending your jokes are funny, Frank, my nose has been just fine.”

Sidestepping his laughing friend, Pinocchio entered the dining room and offered an appetizer to a pretty young woman with curly gold hair. With a cute little smile, she said, “If you don't make any cracks about the food being too hot, too cold, or just right, then I won't repeat the one about the barmaid who sat on Pinocchio's—”

“—and screamed, 'Tell me a lie! And another! Another!'” Pinocchio returned his best bad boy smirk. “That one's true.” Her giggles followed him as he headed into the kitchen. *Not bad. If Ruby doesn't show up, then maybe—*

“Hey, August! I hope your dad won't mind us borrowing his extension cord.” Sean stood by the spinach dip, his electric guitar under one arm and an orange cord coiled around the other. “That old-world concert was a snooze. We'll get your party rockin’.”

“No problem.” Pinocchio set down his nearly empty tray. Back in the Enchanted Forest, Sean had been Prince Thomas—Cinderella's charming suitor. An hour ago, he'd admitted his relief at not having a future throne hanging over his head. From the scowl his sexy-despite-having-a-baby wife had given him, Pinocchio suspected Ella missed the luxury.

When Sean turned the knob on the backdoor, Pinocchio shook his head. “Not outside. You and your band should set up in the living room.”

“Why? Your dad has a great patio. There's room to dance.”

“The rain—”

“Isn't coming 'til morning. The weather report said so.”

“Mr. Gold says the rain's coming this evening.”

Pinocchio saw Sean's forehead wrinkle skeptically. “Mr. Gold? He *personally* gave you a forecast?”

*He told Jiminy. Close enough.* Nodding, Pinocchio retrieved the last bottle of ale from his bucket. “I know him.”
“Well, everyone knows Mr. Gold...”

Pinocchio took a swig. “I know him well. In fact, I invited him tonight—so Dad has someone to talk to.”

Sean burst out laughing. “You rascal. You had me going. Then you let your nose grow.”

“I'm telling the truth. In fact, I'm sure—pretty sure—he's coming.”

“If he did, Ella would freak. She knew him. Back home. Who do you think hocus-pocused the gown and slippers that got her admitted to my ball? And who do you think never got paid?” Sean bumped the door open behind him. “Good thing I know you're telling one of your whoppers. Nobody ever invites Mr. Gold.”

Dark clouds shrouded the sky. Belle found them less dismal than Jefferson, head bowed, trudging beside her. Every question she'd asked as she cajoled him from the parking lot toward her rendezvous with Rumple had brought another sad tale. His mother—by all accounts the sweetest woman who'd ever lived—had died giving birth to him. His father, kind but distant, had mourned throughout the first sixteen years of Jefferson's life. Then he'd died, too.

The wizard sighed. “That's when I really met Rumplestiltskin—at Father's funeral.”

“Oh.”

“The whole day I had a sense someone unexpected was there—at the side of the chapel, across the graveyard, in a corner of the hall at supper. At midnight, after the guests had gone and the servants had retired, I saw him—a man with sparkly gold skin—sitting in Father's favorite chair.”

*He'd been wearing his cloak,* Belle thought.

Jefferson thrust his hands in the pockets of his long, scruffy, gabardine coat. “That night he told me wonderful stories about my parents I'd never heard before. At dawn, he vanished. By noon, creditors locked me out of my house. The only thing of value they left me was my father's hat. I was desperate. I called for Rumplestiltskin.”

As the tall young man swept past the hot chestnut wagon, Belle quickened her pace. For a minute, they wove in and out of the fair-goers lined up for a last chance at Find the Lady, darts, and baseball pitching. Just when she was struggling for a follow-up question, Jefferson grinned.

“Rumplestiltskin renegotiated my debts, taught me how to strike a deal, threw realm-jumping jobs my way, hired me to bring him magical objects from other lands.”

*He was your mentor.* Belle smiled. That was the kind of man she knew Rumple could be.

“With my hat, I rebuilt my family's fortune, found my true love. But when I was about to be married, Rumplestiltskin warned me to give up portal-hopping. ‘Magic,’ he said, ‘always comes with a—’”

Abruptly, Jefferson stopped.

“—Price,” Belle murmured. They'd reached the food tent.

Staring at the entrance, Jefferson asked, “You're sure he won't mind?”

Belle recalled the discomfort on Rumple's face as he'd watched his old colleague trail after his daughter. “I think it would be... good for him.” *He helped Jefferson before. He can help him*
again. She gave the wizard a nudge. Dutifully, he pulled back the canvas flap and led the way.

Inside, Belle saw Rumple sitting on a chair, back against the wall, chin tilted as he listened to David. She smiled. *He has more friends than he admits.*

Catching sight of them, Jefferson narrowed his eyes. “Honey mead,” he muttered and stalked toward the counter.

Belle inhaled sharply. *Where did that come from?* Then she recalled Rumple saying something about the sheriff being careless—*criminally careless*—with the hatter wizard's hat. *That's who he's mad at—David.* She relaxed.

Glancing back, she saw Rumple shaking his head. “We need to identify two more, not one. I *told* you why.”

“Easy for you to say. I'm collecting the specimens. Leroy and Astrid—they'll be flattered. But this Myrtle person didn't look very sociable the other night. What am I supposed to do? Knock on her door and say, 'Heard you and your husband are expecting baby seventeen. Ever wonder whether what you have together is just sex?’”

*They're gathering the ingredients for true love potion.* According to Rumple, that was the mysterious purple glow she'd seen shimmering in his pawn shop's windows—the magic that would bring David's wife and daughter home to Storybrooke.

Belle smiled at the amusement hovering on Rumple's lips. “Better coming from you than me, dearie.”

David folded his arms. “I'm not approaching one more couple than I have to.”

Belle recalled Rumple's awkwardness asking for hair strands from Skyr and Polly. *Someday, he'll have to tell me how he managed to snag one from David.* Catching Rumple's eyes, she rolled hers. Laugh lines winked in his cheeks. As she walked forward, he stretched out his hand. Taking it, she said, “Papageno and Papagena. They'll donate if I ask.”

“Great. With luck, we won't need to identify any more couples.” David paused, his eyes resting meaningfully on their clasped hands. Then he nodded at her—”Belle”—and strode away.

“Hmm.” She released Rumple's fingers to pull up the other chair. “You did it, didn't you?”

Rumple gave her one of his innocent half-smiles, half-frowns. “Did what?”

Belle quirked her mouth. “Our love. Despite my objections, you tested it.”

Rumple's eyelids lowered, and he looked aside. His lips moved as if trying out things to say. Finally, he raised his hands in a gesture of *you-got-me.*

“Oh, no. *I've made him feel guilty again.* Though she had to admit, he looked adorable. “I can't blame you. I gave you plenty of reasons to doubt.”

“Sweetheart, it's not you. It's… it's…”

“Shh. No need to explain.” Belle rested her hand on his. “*I know* why you excluded our love potion from David's project.” When his fingers twitched, she squeezed them. “It's so beautiful, you can't give it up.”

Rumple blinked. “Yes, that's why. You know me so well. I like looking at it.”
*Just like my chipped cup.* “But if it can be useful, you have to let it go.”

“Useful, yes.” Rumple nodded, but his gaze seemed searching.

Belle stroked his wrist. *Besides, we have better ways to prove our love is true.*

Chapter End Notes

With all the trouble Rumplestiltskin took to make the love potion in season one, I'm surprised he never made another batch—and especially that he didn't make a Rumbelle batch.
An Ocean of Darkness

Chapter Summary

Emma and Neal
Gold and Belle
Archie and Vincent
August and Ruby?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold): The truth? That nothing can stop the darkness. (*The Thing You Love Most*)

Archie squeezed the second half of the lemon, drizzling it back and forth over the halibut steaks. “Just let me add the—the spices. Then I'll—I'll give you the grand tour.” He smiled over his shoulder at Vincent, perched on his kitchen stool, Figaro purring on his lap and Pongo stretching his head up for a vigorous back-of-the-ears tickling.

“Your home is lovely. Shingle style, isn't it? All local stone and wood paneling. Rustic and elegant at the same time.”

Self-conscious, Archie shrugged. “I—I've been lucky.”

*Extremely lucky.* When the Evil Queen had crashed Snow White's and Prince Charming's wedding to proclaim, *I shall destroy your happiness,* she'd meant everyone's. But as a lowly cricket, he'd escaped her special attention. Instead, the curse had assigned his fate by default. In the Enchanted Forest, he'd been a royal counselor; thus, he was a counselor in Storybrooke. The cricket-sized mansion Geppetto had fashioned for him had been translated into his rambling seaside house. *How can I complain?* If Regina had known he'd once advised the crown couple to dispense justice to her, no telling how horrible his current circumstances would have been.

“But not lucky enough to find someone with whom to share your life.”

Archie felt a pang in his chest. *Vincent knows me so well.* Turning, he stuffed the lemon peel down the garbage disposal. “I used to—to live with a widower. For a while, I—I helped raise his son.” He peeked over his shoulder for his friend's response.

“You sound proud. I'm glad.” The skin at the corners of Vincent's incredibly blue eyes crinkled. “What happened between—”

“Oh, we're great friends, Gepp—uh—Marco and I.” Archie sprinkled chopped garlic and basil over the fish. “But just friends. He isn't… We never… There's never been…”

“Never anyone?”

Archie sighed. *Just a memory of a road trip to New Orleans—a memory of something that never really happened.* He opened his pre-heated oven and slid the stoneware baking dish inside. “I've been… rather a—a monk.”
“Celibate?”

At the word, Archie swayed slightly. Then he gripped the granite counter with one hand and closed the oven door with the other. “That's right. That's what I've been meaning—meaning to tell you. I'm not—not homosexual. Nor heterosexual either. I'm more… non-sexual.” Like a dwarf or a fairy.

“And you're happy?”

Archie moistened his lips. Then he arranged them into a beaming smile and turned around. “I can't complain.” The queen couldn't destroy what I never had in the first place.

Vincent gazed at him a moment. “Me neither.” Then he scooped the black-and-white cat off his lap and gently set him on the floor.

* * * * *

Battling zombies had drained the oomph from most of the fairy dust Tink had sprinkled on Neal. He'd required the head rush of defeating them to shoot from the ground to one of the Lost Boys' treetop posts. The thrill of pulling Emma out of harm's way had helped him zoom faster. But during his scouting flight high above their devastated camp, he'd felt the pull of gravity. Counting three dozen monsters still to handle hadn't made for happy thoughts.

Any more flights before Tink returns really have to count. Neal glanced at Emma, huddled beside him on the lookout hammock. The best way to keep my thoughts happy would be leaving her safely behind.

Not that Emma would ever agree. Each plan she'd proposed required her—creating a distraction, doing an end run, leading the walking dead on a wild goose chase.

“We're lucky they're voodoo zombies, not science-fiction zombies,” she whispered. “They won't infect us with a crazy virus.”

“And they don't want to eat our brains.” Neal felt Emma shiver. More than anything, he wanted to wrap an arm around her shoulders, keep her from facing another horror ever again. Instead, he grasped his knees with his hands.

Emma leaned closer. “But voodoo zombies obey a master. And Cora's orders are clear: don't stop until we're dead.”

“But why?” Before tonight, Neal had never even heard of that crazy sorceress.

A howl rose from the darkness. Emma cringed. Then she slipped her hand down her zippered jacket and pulled out a disk hanging on a chain. “I think she wants this.”

Neal cupped his hand under hers to tilt it into the moonlight. What Emma held was a metal case with a glass front. Inside, an arrow jiggled at the center of a dial. “Why would a sorceress send zombies after a compass?”

“Because it's enchanted. It doesn't point north. It points to whatever one's heart is missing most—even if that means crossing time and space to locate it.”

“Kind of a realm-jumper's GPS.” Neal peered more closely at the strange instrument. What is Emma's heart missing most? Henry. If I never get to be his father, at least I can protect his mother. He squeezed her hand then let her go—the only goodbye he could risk without giving away his intentions.
She clasped the compass to her chest. “A giant gave this to me. Long story. Since then, I've never let it out of arm's reach. But things have changed. You can fly again, and you know how to get to earth. Maybe the best way to keep this from Cora is to destroy it.”

_No!_ Neal took a deep breath, determined to keep his tone light. “Let's keep our options open, at least 'til Tink shows up.” _If I don't make it back, you might need that compass after all._ He gazed at Emma, wishing the moonlight wasn't so dim. In their vagabond days, looking into her eyes had always given him courage.

“Okay. I'll hang onto it.” Emma slipped the compass back inside her jacket. “But if a zombie grabs for it, I'm tossing it in a fire spout. We can't risk Cora using it to find Storybrooke.”

“Storybrooke?” Neal frowned. “Why does she want to go there?”

“As near as I can figure… revenge.”

* * * * *

As Jefferson unwrapped his long scarf, Mr. Gold fidgeted with his cane. In contrast, Belle sat perfectly still as if afraid of spooking the younger wizard. Just before he'd joined them, she'd whispered, _You were his mentor, Rumple. That's sweet. Why didn't you tell me?_ Recalling her words, Mr. Gold grimaced. Now Belle was about to see for herself that being the Dark One's apprentice was not a pleasant calling. When at last the length of gray wool hung down Jefferson's shoulders, Mr. Gold winced. What his old protégé had been hiding was shocking—an angry red scar that apparently circled his neck.

“Oh!” Belle gasped. “You poor man. Someone tried to strangle you?”

“Strangle?” Jefferson's eyebrows shot high. “No. The Queen of Hearts preferred 'Off with his head!'”

Mr. Gold massaged his aching leg through his silk suit. When he'd visited Wonderland with Jefferson's father, he'd found the place trivial and annoying, except for one thing: nobody bowed to kings or queens. Alice's adventures had toppled them all. Until Cora. And he'd helped banish her there.

_Not my fault they let her take over_, he assured himself.

At last Belle broke her stunned silence. “You were… beheaded? And lived? But that's impossible.”

“In Wonderland,” Mr. Gold said softly, “many things that shouldn't be possible are.” He watched Belle's gentle eyes widen as she absorbed this new evil—yet another she'd never have known if it weren't for him.

Jefferson drained the last of his honey mead. “After Regina stranded me without my realm-jumper, Cora commanded I make another. Each time I failed, she cut off my head.” He crumpled his paper cup. “After all, if she'd taken my heart, I'd have lost my reason for trying—my hope of seeing my heart's desire again, my Grace.”

“You're saying Cora _could_ have taken your heart? Without killing you?” Belle pressed a hand against her ruffled red blouse. “That's possible in Wonderland, too?”

Jefferson darted Mr. Gold a glance, checking with him before he spoke just as he used to do in the Enchanted Forest. Leaning back out of Belle's sight line, Mr. Gold returned a tight shake of his head. He dreaded her questions if she found out magic could do that in their old land as well.
“In Wonderland, yes.” Jefferson swathed his neck again. “Cora had a vault filled with beating hearts. She took so many, she forgot whose was whose.”

Belle swallowed. “So that's how she got her title.”

“Ironic, considering.” Jefferson's eyes widened. “Cora had no heart.”

Mr. Gold rubbed his forehead, tamping down the memories. She was my apprentice, too. Uncomfortable, he shifted on his metal chair. What's holding up those burgers?

“It took Regina's curse to yank me out of Wonderland. If she hadn't included me, I'd be there still—head on, head off, head on, head off...”

Mr. Gold shuddered. What's done is done. Cora is gone. Her daughter saw the body. Rest in peace.

“Maybe after everything Regina did to you, she felt guilty,” Belle said. “So she helped you.”

“Helped me? By doing what her mother wouldn't? Rip my heart out?”

Rumple swung his gaze to Jefferson. Did he suffer that too? The emotion twisting the young man's forehead appeared too intense for someone whose heart no longer thumped inside him.

“At least, it felt like she did.” Jefferson let his head drop, burying his chin in the folds of his scarf. “Regina cursed Storybrooke with forgetfulness. Me she cursed with memory. She forced me to watch my Grace live day after happy day with the neighbors—unaware she was missing anything. Unaware she was missing me.”

“They… seem really nice,” Belle ventured.

The young wizard groaned.

“I think that's the problem.” Mr. Gold remembered Jefferson's daughter strolling arm-and-arm with the smiling couple. For a father to see that daily would feel like having his heart ripped from his chest.

Jefferson's eyes lost their focus. “For twenty-eight years I wandered Storybrooke like a ghost with only Regina's spite to keep me company. No one else noticed me—not until Emma's arrival began chipping away the curse.”

“How did you know who I was?” Belle asked. “We'd never met.”

Jefferson shrugged. “Regina likes to gloat.”

That's her downfall, Mr. Gold thought. As it was her mother's. His eyes strayed to Belle. She clasped her hands against her stomach and stared at them. A single pinch appeared in her forehead, and her soft lips pressed together. Clearly, seeing life as Jefferson had experienced it was a lot to take in.

When Belle looked up again, her blue eyes brimmed with sympathy. “I can understand why you wanted revenge. If anyone had done such bad things to me, that thought would be hard to avoid.”

Mr. Gold gazed at Belle. Someone did do such bad things to you—the same someone who did them to Jefferson, my other apprentice, Regina. For three decades, Belle had been the innocent victim of vengeance—vengeance that should have come to him. The memories made her whimper in her sleep and jump at loud noises when she was awake. Yet when it came to his meting out retribution against her tormentor, she'd disapproved.
Sidelong, Mr. Gold spied Granny serving hamburgers-and-fries to a second couple that had walked in after him. Even someone as upright and straightforward as she couldn't resist petty revenge against the object of an old grudge. *But not Belle.*

Suddenly, Jefferson gripped the table. “Regina cheated me, taunted me, deprived me, but that's *not* the worst of it. She broke a deal.” He paused, breathing in quick bursts like a chuffing horse. “She wanted to retrieve something from the Enchanted Forest—a certain half-eaten apple. When she found she couldn't work my hat, she asked *me.* I drilled through time and space till she got what she wanted. In return, she promised to wipe away my past, wake me and Grace to new identities, new memories, a new future. Was it my fault Henry ate her blasted turnover instead of Emma?”

Belle sent Mr. Gold a worried glance. Reluctantly, he reached out and patted Jefferson's shoulder. The muscles were so tense he could feel them trembling. “There, now. Perhaps we should change the subject.”

His ex-apprentice took three ragged breaths. “Magic always comes with a price. *You* taught me that. When Regina refused to pay the one we agreed, another had to be exacted.”

Mr. Gold exhaled slowly. *I tried, but she passed the cost on to someone else.*

“Here’s a topic to lighten your mood,” Belle said. “You and Rumple used to work together. I'm sure you have some amusing anecdotes.”

Mr. Gold's throat tightened. Allowing Jefferson to describe the havoc wreaked by his former apprentices had been risky enough. But schemes they’d carried out together? No. Without wrinkling his brow, he could list a half dozen joint ventures Belle could never hear about—not without turning their love potion from vibrant purple to a sickly, unusable brown.

*I have to end this conversation. For Emma and Mary-Margaret's sake.*

Mr. Gold shot his ex-protégé a warning—a mere flicker of a glance—but immediately Jefferson read him, as if they were still in the Enchanted Forest.

Abruptly, the younger wizard slid his chair back and stood. “Sorry. Big day tomorrow with Grace. The neighbors are taking us sailing.” He raised his hand, tipped a non-existent hat, then trudged away.

* * * * *

The rain pelting the roof of his dad's house sounded like music to Pinocchio. And the lyrics were, *you should have believed me, you should have believed me.* Not that he was happy Sean's electric guitar had shorted out—and he was very happy the jolt it gave his friend had been minor—but still, he liked being proven a truth-teller for a change.

Sitting on the bottom step of his dad's staircase, Pinocchio pressed his cell phone to his ear. He'd already convinced Ruby to come to his party. Now all he had to do was get her to convince Belle. That would bring Mr. Gold. His showing up would really put the lie to the assumption Pinocchio's word couldn't be trusted.

He cupped his hands over his ears to block out the Dance Central rowdiness drifting from the den. After Ruby ended her anecdote, he said, “Wow. When word gets around that Mr. Gold has your back—”

“—nobody will dare say *boo* to me ever again.”
Pinocchio grinned. Then he said, “Speaking of which… is Mr. Gold still there?”

“Yes.” Ruby dropped her voice to a whisper. “If Granny has her way, he'll be here 'til closing. But I'm grilling up an order for him and Belle right now. This time I'm making sure they get it.”

Chapter End Notes

If canon goofs up a match (IMHO) or doesn't provide one, I'm happy to oblige.
It Could Be Something

Chapter Summary

The hamburger date revisited.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Snow White (Mary-Margaret Blanchard):** But I'm rescuing you. *(An Apple as Red as Blood)*

Charming spotted the half-full bag of popcorn at the foot of the lamppost before Henry did. His grandson had already attacked a 32-ounce cola, popped five balloons, and squashed a box of cinnamon bites. Charming could understand grousing about leaving the fair early, but making a mess to protest bedtime was unacceptable. "If you kick one more thing, I'm volunteering you to——"

Butter-soaked puffs flew into the air. With a perfect about-face, his grandson began marching backwards. "Saturday morning, I'm supposed to muck out the stable. You'll volunteer me to collect trash instead? A bunch of my classmates are coming. Please?"

Charming shook his head, crunching gravel underfoot as he headed toward the far end of the parking lot and Emma's Volkswagen. "Don't think you can't do both. You'll have time after I drop your broadsword lesson."

As Charming intended, Henry's mouth fell open. But instead of responding *Yes, sir*, his grandson launched himself running and threw his arms around his grandpa's middle. "No! You've got to teach me to fight. What if Cora finds out how to get to Storybrooke?"

Charming's mouth twisted. "Has Regina been trying to scare——"

"No. Mom was trying to make me feel safe." Charming's leather jacket muffled Henry's voice. "When I told her what Aurora said about Cora, she looked like she wanted to puke. She said Cora was supposed to be dead. Then she said, don't be afraid. *She'd* die for me." He craned his neck to look up at his grandpa. "*That* scared me."

Charming kept up a reassuring smile. If Regina feared her mother that much, then broadswords would be inadequate. But that was no surprise. With practitioners of dark magic, the best defenses were the time-honored ones: flatter their vanity, play one against the other, and stay out of their way until they hoisted themselves on their own petards.

Before Henry could question his silence, Charming swung him into the air. "You know *everything* happens for a reason. Well, I think that's why Snow and Emma got sent to the Enchanted Forest—to stop that wicked sorceress from reaching Storybrooke." *And as soon as Rumplestiltskin makes that true love portal, I'm joining them.*

When Charming set his grandson back on his feet, optimism glowed in his young eyes. "They're heroes. And Peter Pan and Mulan and Tinker Bell are there to help them."

"That's right. With so much good in one place, how can evil possibly triumph?" As Charming reached into his jeans pocket for Emma's keys, the first drops of rain fell on his face. "Come on. Let's
Together, they pounded down the gravelly, lamp-lit lane toward the yellow VW.

"And the Lost Boys," Charming added, his voice bouncing with each step. "They never die."

"Yup," Henry said, pulling ahead and tapping Emma's trunk.

Good boy. But before Charming could place second, something caught his eye, bringing him to a dead stop: a pair of sneakers sticking out from under a midnight blue Cadillac. He had an urge to kick them like Henry had kicked the popcorn. Remembering his position as acting sheriff, he poked the left one with his boot.

From beneath the car came a yelp, a bump, and a groan. Charming seized the ankles and pulled.

"Stop, stop! I'm coming."

Releasing his grip, Charming watched the man wriggle out. The khaki pants and navy peacoat could have belonged to half the males in Storybrooke. Then he saw the ratty red knit cap. "Mr. Smee, what on earth were you doing under there?"

The man he'd called a concerned citizen the day before scrambled to his feet and cowered against the bumper. Rain ran down his cheeks in dirty rivulets.

He sure looks guilty. But of what, Charming had no idea. "What's that under your arm?"

Mr. Smee gulped. Then gingerly he extended what looked like a rusted cookie box. "It's—it's..."

Charming saw a flash of white. Suddenly, the explanation was as plain as the chattering of Mr. Smee's teeth. "No. Don't tell me. It's the reason you were down there. Your box rolled under the Caddy."

Mr. Smee dashed raindrops from his eyes. "It's—"

"It's time you were on your way," Charming finished for him. My cop intuition is really on fire tonight.

Slowly, Mr. Smee edged away from the Cadillac. Then he scurried to a muddy truck, stuttering, "It's—it's—it's—"

"It's good seeing you, too!" Charming called out as Mr. Smee clambered up into the front seat. Lucky guy. The storm was washing away the mud for him. He had to be careful, though. Trucks like that were often stolen. That very morning, Charming had taken a theft report about a similar red pickup.

A minute later, when Charming revved the VW bug's engine, he noticed Henry giving him a funny look. "I heard what you told that man. Are you sure? I mean, the box was square. How could it roll?"

Charming popped the clutch. "Mr. Smee accidentally kicked it."

Henry frowned. "You're sure?"

What other explanation could there be for such an upstanding member of the community to be under that car? Charming flipped the windshield wiper switch. "As sure as I am that no way will Cora ever wield any of her dark magic in Storybrooke."
That goddamn, double-crossing, no-good, son-of-a-bitch Neal Cassidy," Emma whispered. "He's not coming back." Now that she'd voiced her fear aloud, she could hear her own panic.

He'd promised a brief reconnoitering flight. He'd lied. Only one possibility explained the lack of commotion in the camp below. Neal was attempting their plan on his own—luring the pack to the clearing where he'd rescued Slightly, rousing the rodents of unusual size to attack, tricking straggler zombies into fire spouts, and sending the rest stumbling into lightning sand. For a pair of fighters, their scheme was ambitious. For one, it would be suicide.

Emma moaned. Once upon a time, she'd told Henry his father was a fireman who'd died a hero—a lie to a wistful child about his missing dad. Could fate really be this cruel, tantalizing her with rediscovering the love of her life, only to snatch him away—replace her made-up tale of noble sacrifice with one heartrendingly real?

"Damn you, Neal. You ditched me once. You're not doing it again."

Emma gripped the hammock with one hand and drew her sword with the other. Wasting no time, she sawed one of the ropes that secured her perch to the cypress. Hopefully, when the hammock was hanging straight down, she could use it to reach branches low enough for her to climb to the ground.

*If not, I'm screwed.*

Twine snapped beneath Emma's blade strand by strand. Then abruptly, the rope broke—dropping her a yard, slamming the hammock against the trunk, jarring her entire body. For a moment she hung there, trying to catch her breath. Then she sheathed her sword and began clambering down.

Lower and lower Emma went, handhold by handhold, yet her dangling feet couldn't find a solid branch. When she clenched her fingers around the end of the hammock, her mouth went dry. What could she do now? Let go? If she broke a leg, she couldn't help Neal.

Then Emma heard a familiar jingle. Twisting her head, she saw a welcome green glow floating toward her.

"Tinker Bell!"

Neal wavered in the middle of the clearing. The last time he was here, he'd saved the day—snatching Slightly from the lightning sand and enticing the rodents-of-unusual-size to stop snarling and get tickled. He'd truly been the man of the hour—until Emma slugged him.

Now Neal hoped that last good deed would be how she remembered him—and how she'd describe him to Henry when she finally reunited with their son. The nine blade-swinging zombies slowly backing him up toward the sandpit would make sure he never saw Storybrooke himself. Without Tinker Bell and her amazing dust, he didn't stand a chance.

*But I'll go down fighting.* Neal raised his cutlass slashing edge out, level with the soulless eyes of the advancing corpses. Surrendering concern for his own life freed him to try close quarter moves he'd never attempted with a real live—or real dead—opponent before. The more monsters he took with him, the fewer his comrades would have to face later.

Done with regrets, Neal rushed forward, gashed a dead pirate from ear-to-ear, thrust upward under another's chin until the jawbone cracked, and slit a hole in the next one's chest. A saber flew into the air and an ax clattered to the rocky ground, but the third cadaver clung to his rapier. When it pierced Neal's shoulder, he winced. Using his hilt like brass knuckles, he smashed the carcass in the face. The stench of death was nauseating.
"Ready?" Rumple's eyes sparkled in the party lights strung across the food tent's ceiling.

Like cinnamon mixed with sugar, Belle thought. She tore her gaze away to glance at the countdown clock displayed on her cell phone then focused on him again. "Ready."

Rumple tapped the screen with one hand and placed his other on the table. Returning her best rosebud smile, Belle laid her hand on his. Faster and faster, they stacked their hands, pulling from the bottom and competing for the top. When the virtual timer pinged, her right hand was draped triumphantly across his moonstone ring.

"Did I win?" Belle asked, though the laugh lines wreathing Rumple's cheeks told her it didn't matter. He leaned back, grinning. "Indeed, you did. Again."

"Third time in a row." Forget chess and I-go. Pancake is my new favorite game.

Out the corner of her eye, Belle caught Ruby motioning with her head toward their table and pressing two plates heaped with burgers and fries into Granny's hands. The old woman—her dear friend of the last three weeks—looked disgruntled. In fact, as she plodded toward them, her mouth seemed to be warring between a professional smile and a personal scowl. Poor thing. She's probably knackered from serving the crowd that came to the fair.

When the old woman set the specials down, Belle cocked her head. "They smell delicious, Granny."

Instead of relaxing, the old woman's expression became more strained. "They are delicious. Didn't take any dark magic, either."

Belle's eyes widened. Is she mad at me?

Across from her, she saw Rumple avert his eyes until Granny about-faced and stomped to the counter. Then he glanced at Belle. At last, he uncurled an index finger to point surreptitiously at Granny. "I have a complicated relationship with her..." he sighed "...as I do with most people."

Oh, Rumple. "Did you know Granny... before?"

He grimaced.

Belle moistened her lips. "You can tell me anything or... nothing. Whatever you choose. I'm here to eat a hamburger." She dropped her eyes to study it. The layers of bun, patties, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and onions looked daunting. Good thing I've watched how people handle these. Lifting the monster to her mouth, she took her first bite. "Mm." As promised, the combination of textures and tastes—juicy, crisp, salty, fluffy—was scrumptious. But when she lowered her burger to her plate, she saw Rumple hesitating.

Looking down, he coughed. "Back in the Enchanted Forest, on the day Ruby was born, Granny was desperate. She called on me. In exchange for a basket of blackberries, I fulfilled her deepest, truest, most secret heart's desire." He fanned his fingers. "She never forgave me for it."

Belle's forehead pinched together. Rumple's confession was more cryptic than silence. Yet she could see from the faint flush on his cheeks how much the admission had cost him.

Abruptly, he grabbed the red plastic bottle standing at the end of the table. "You know, you should
try it with ketchup. Condiments are this world's most powerful magic."

Gasping with relief at the sight of Tinker Bell, Emma tightened her grip on the dangling hammock. When she got her bearings, she realized the fairy was coming from the direction of the clearing where Neal had been headed. "Tink! Did you see Peter? Is he all right?"

Stopping mid-air, the green light jingled.

Emma mentally kicked herself for bothering with a question. She hadn't a clue what Tinker Bell had answered. *I should have just said, "Help me!"*

But the fairy didn't.

Emma gaped. She'd never had any jealous run-ins with the Lost Boys' guardian fairy—not like Wendy in earth's version of Neal's story—but as the twinkling green light continued hovering just beyond reach, she wished she'd made an effort to be friends.

Emma's fingers slipped a knuckle-length. Her heart skipped a beat then surged to catch up. Mind racing, she blurted out the detail that had interested the fairy at her first campfire: "I'm the savior! Get me to Peter! I can save him!"

The green light bobbled as if Tink were making up her mind. Then she whizzed forward past Emma's ear, tugged on her jacket collar, and released a cloud of fairy sparkles.

Emma sneezed. Until now, she'd never flown with less than two Lost Boys. Could a single jingling light really keep her aloft? Then the tiny fairy zoomed skyward with a force so strong, Emma's fingers jerked off the hammock.

Fairy dust—*who'd have thought it was this powerful?* "Thanks, Tink. Take me back the way you came." The clearing was so close, Emma could hear the moans and groans of the zombies Neal had led there. *Please, let it not be too late!*

But instead of cooperating, Tinker Bell swung Emma in a wide arc and began hauling her in the opposite direction.

"Hey! Wait a minute! You're going the wrong way!"

The fairy jingled fiercely as if arguing back.

Noooooo. Not only had Neal ditched her to take on three dozen zombies alone, he'd also roped in his fairy friend to remove her even farther from danger. *That's why Tink waffled. She knows her boy's committing suicide.*

A knot formed in Emma's throat and came out as a sob. Yet inexplicably, the sound wasn't despair. It was joy. *Neal loves me—really, really loves me.* Grudgingly, she'd accepted the reason he'd abandoned her eleven years earlier—so she could fulfill her destiny, so she could save her mother, her father, and the ten thousand others who'd depended on her—but doubts about Neal's personal feelings had lingered.

Not anymore. Neal was sacrificing himself for her. The tragic beauty of it made Emma lighter than air. With growing wondernent, she realized gravity had stopped pulling at her legs. Instead, they were trailing behind her. Spreading her arms like wings, she felt herself lift higher.

*I'm flying.* Emma tilted and found herself gliding in a circle. Above her, Tinker Bell jingled and
jangled as though she'd gone crazy, but Emma no longer hung from the fairy's itty-bitty hand. *Now I'm giving Tink a ride.* Homing in on Neal, she angled her arms like jet wings. As she picked up speed, she laughed.

A terrifying howl ripped the night, yet Emma felt no fear. "Hang on, Tink. Let's save Peter Pan."

Chapter End Notes

At the back of the shot, before Granny grabs the hamburgers from the counter, Rumple and Belle are playing some kind of game. She says she won again and he says "Three times in a row" (what a delightful bit of business for Robert Carlyle and Emilie de Ravin to add to the scene). That the game they were playing was Pancake isn't original with me but, sadly, I lost the reference to the fan that suggested it.

The show never revealed why Granny dislikes Mr. Gold so much. I have my theories! Hope you enjoyed this chapter.
Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin): Be careful. Emotional entanglements can lead us down very dangerous paths (Fruit of the Poisonous Tree).

Belle stared at her half-eaten hamburger, weighing the pleasure of taking another bite against the tightness in the waistband of her plaid wool skirt. When the plank floor creaked, she looked up to see Ruby zipping her puffy red jacket as she strolled toward her and Rumple. Surveying the dining tent, Belle realized the three concessions had closed and most of the customers had gone.

Ruby pulled her chestnut hair out of her jacket and draped it over her shoulders. "I'm off to August's party. He asked me to tell Mr. Gold his dad baked him some Brutti ma Buoni."

Rumple smiled at Belle. "Italian almond cookies. The recipe is an implanted memory but quite delicious."

August's dad. He was that nice old man Geppetto she'd met earlier. Before Belle could respond, Ruby continued.

"August also said he hopes that makes up for not having that other appetizer." She raised her dark eyebrows, clearly clueless about the message she was about to deliver. "The one he promised you in the sheriff's station? He said you'd know—"

"That young man does like dancing on the edge," Chuckling, Rumple shook his head. "Tell August, I live by his discretion. And tell him—" he paused, as if making sure Ruby was paying attention "—so does he."

Looking more perplexed than before, Ruby hitched her saddlebag purse higher on her shoulder. "Ohhh-kay." She turned then peered back at them. "See you."

"Later." Belle looked at Rumple. You were joking, weren't you?

Answering the question she knew was in her eyes, Rumple reached out for her. "I don't know what August expects from my presence, but I promised I'd come. Perhaps I'm the entertainment—a chance for his friends to see whether the scary stories are true. August had heard the one about me eating firstborn—"

"Oh, Rumple. Nobody believes—"

"Maybe not. But someone is bound to recall some dark tale not so easily belied." He patted her hand. "No matter. If I'm cornered, you'll rescue me."

Belle tried to smile. "It took me some time to get to know you."
Rumple's concentration switched to something beyond Belle's shoulder, and the tenderness vanished from his face. Then she caught a click, click, click that made her stomach twist. *The Evil Queen.* In the Enchanted Forest, the sound of her high heels had warned Belle of an impending slap, tirade, or boast about some petty triumph over Rumplestiltskin. In Storybrooke, Regina had been content to lift the flap on the door to her psych ward cell and gloat. Since both the woman and her malice had been mysteries, those visits had tormented her more.

When her former captor stopped, towering over them, Belle shuddered.

O + O + O + O + O

Mr. Gold squeezed Belle's hand. Seeing her lips quiver and her cheeks grow pale, he envisioned conjuring another wraith. *No. This time, I'll reach down that evil queen's throat and rip out her soul myself.*

"Gold," Regina began without pretense at a greeting, "we need to talk."

*Indeed.* At Regina's announcement, Mr. Gold saw the parents at a nearby table exchange worried looks. Hastily, the mother scooped up their children's half-eaten submarine sandwiches. After the entire family scurried out, they were the only patrons left. He focused on Belle's eyes, silently cajoling the light to return. He waited until she managed a faint smile before answering, "Do we?"

"Yes." Regina retracted her umbrella with a snap then whacked it against her thigh, sending raindrops flying. "I'm coming about the one thing that might unite us."

*Henry?* Two days earlier, Mr. Gold had helped the boy when Regina's magic had floundered. He was more than willing to do so again, but he'd enjoy hearing her beg. Feigning indifference, he said, "What on earth can that be?"

"Cora."

Mr. Gold froze. Regina hadn't used her mother's name in his presence since the night before her marriage to Snow White's father—the night he'd goaded her into shoving their mutual bête noire through an enchanted looking glass all the way to Wonderland. Hearing the name now raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Slowly, he slid his hand off Belle's.

Sidelong, Mr. Gold watched Regina cross her arms. "She's coming from our land. I need your help to stop her."

*Coming? How could she be coming?* "She's dead." Rumple's forehead knit together as he tried to process what he'd just heard. Cora could reanimate corpses—march them like rotting automatons to wreak her will. But she couldn't reanimate herself. *Dead is dead.* Reluctantly, he turned his head to stare at Regina. "You told me you saw the body."

"Apparently, you taught her well." Regina jerked her head as if to still a tremor. "She's not."

*And apparently, you're the most pathetic, inapt, slipshod pupil a wizard ever had. You interred a woman in stasis from a sleeping spell—one of her own devising, one she could break. You were too dim to recognize the difference.* Mr. Gold forced himself to breathe in, breathe out—to retain a semblance of calm. The day Regina had crowed she'd finally done it—sent an assassin to the Queen of Hearts via the hat she'd stolen from Jefferson—her claim had knocked the Dark One off-balance. He'd dedicated years of scheming and counter-scheming to keep Cora's unspeakable volatility contained. That someone could kill her had seemed unimaginable. After the shock had worn off—and the ache had subsided—he'd felt relieved.
Am I really going to have to deal with Cora all over again?

Mr. Gold gazed at Belle. She was the counter to Cora—the hero who, despite his complete unworthiness, fate had blessed him to know. The day he'd discovered her death was a lie, the explosion of joy had made him weep. Not so tonight's revelation. The thought of Cora alive filled him with dread. He glared at Regina. *How could you be so incompetent?*

Regina thrust out her jaw. "She's on her way. And I don't need to remind you how unpleasant that would be for both of us."

Casually, Mr. Gold took a sip of his iced tea. No sense in letting Regina know that for once he concurred completely. "Unpleasant for you. I can handle Cora."

Regina flung back her sleek black hair. "That's not how she told the story."

*Oh, really? Who defeated whose desperate desire to be a queen in the Enchanted Forest? Who banished who to the most annoying of all the known universes?* Mr. Gold jiggled his head—hoping his next words wouldn't sound like pure bravado. "I won in the end." *I will again."

"Maybe. But there's a difference this time. This time, you have someone you care about." Regina slanted her gaze at Belle. "This time, you have a weakness."

Mr. Gold took a sharp breath. If there was one thing Cora knew, it was how to exploit what others cared about. Anxiety creased his forehead. He couldn't risk more harm to Belle.

"I'm not Rumple's weakness."

Startled, Mr. Gold glanced up. Belle still looked pale, but her back was straight and her chin was out. *Bravo, sweetheart.* She was steeling herself to face the Evil Queen. Just seeing her made him feel stronger.

Belle locked eyes with Regina. "I don't do magic, but I'm perfectly capable of helping in other ways. I can research, organize—"

*"Research? You think that's funny? You have no idea who we're discussing.""

"Actually, I do." Belle tilted her head. "Cora is a sorceress who used to live in the Enchanted Forest then went to Wonderland where she became queen. She's known for being a heartless woman who—"

"Heartless?" This time, Regina grasped her umbrella with both hands and laughed. "That's an *interesting* way of putting it—considering what a collection Cora had of *other* people's hearts."

Belle's gaze remained steady. "I know Cora's your mother. I can tell your childhood wasn't easy, and I think that explains a lot. Right now, you're frightened for yourself—that's clear from your face—but you're more frightened for the one you care about, the one you consider your weakness."

Mr. Gold's fingers touched his lips. They were parted. Belle wasn't merely facing the Evil Queen; she was making her crumble. If that wasn't magic, what was? Already Regina's haughtiness had sagged. Her shoulders drooped, and her hands hung at her sides.

Mr. Gold compressed his mouth to keep from smiling. Belle knew how to cut through his bluster in exactly the same way.

"Difficult childhood," Regina muttered. "What would you know."
Belle shrugged. "Not much. My biggest trauma was having to hide books under my pillow, so I could read them after everyone was asleep. Recently, though... I've been through some stuff."

Mr. Gold blinked. Had Belle just taken a dig at Regina? More surprisingly, her tormentor's eyes appeared guilty. She tugged at her neckline. Her red knit dress clung to her in ways that looked constricting rather than slinky.

"And," Belle continued, "I know the hurt, the anger, the fear—they're hard to sort out. Trying to make sense of bad experiences, it's easier to lash out at the people closest to us—issue ultimatums about how we want things to be—when the real way to gain support is patience, listening, admitting one's needs, trying to understand."

When Belle glanced over, Mr. Gold knew she was making her own admission to him. He nodded, his eyes acknowledging everything she'd said. A smile flickered on her lips. He returned it. In his mind's eye, their true love potion glowed in a swirling rainbow of sparkling light.

"Hah," Regina answered.

Belle gazed back. "Your immediate concern is protecting Henry from whatever anger you believe your mother harbors toward you. But deep down..." She drew a long breath "...deep down, you wish you could introduce them."

Belle nailed it. Mr. Gold could see it in the war between indignation and misery taking place on Regina's face. Was it possible? Could his beloved's insights transform an enemy into an ally?

When Regina planted her hands on her hips, he knew it wasn't to be.

"Introduce Henry? You understand nothing. I'd die before I let Mother anywhere near Henry. She's the reason I never bore a child myself. The night she caught my true love and me trying to elope, she reached into my Daniel's chest and yanked out his heart. Then, right before my eyes, she crushed it."

Belle's eyebrows pulled together. "You poor woman. That's awful. I'm so sorry."

"Hmm." Regina licked her lips. "And imagine how I felt when I discovered it was your darling Rumple—who had taught my mother how to do it."

At first, Mr. Gold didn't fully register the blow Regina had struck him. Not until he saw the dismay in Belle's eyes. By then it was too late. The venom had taken hold. Of all the ways he'd imagined her learning something from his past too horrible to bear, a heart-to-heart with Regina hadn't been one of them. A deadening chill seeped through his body. Like the inevitability of succumbing to a sleeping curse, first the numbness, then the searing pain.

"You didn't know that, did you, Belle." Regina gave her a smug cat smile. "Every bit of dark magic my mother knows, Rumple taught her. That's why they're such dangerous rivals. When they get together, sparks fly. Everyone else is collateral damage."

"We're done, dearie." You've won. Mr. Gold clenched his jaw to keep it from trembling. He'd known the day Belle's love would die was only a matter of time. Now that it had come, he couldn't blame Regina and her spite. "I haven't created a passage to the Enchanted Forest, if that's what you're worried about. Nine vials of true love potion are required. I've only brewed four. The fifth, the most beautiful of all, is now a bottle of mud."

On Emma's first sweep over the clearing, she saw at least a dozen felled zombies—some with their dismembered limbs still moving. ROUS nosed around the scattered parts. Another dozen were just
gone—no doubt buried in the lightning sand or broiled in one of the fire spouts that sporadically lit the night. The last dozen milled about, apparently still hunting for the bearer of the enchanted compass.

No Neal.

On her next pass, Emma noticed four creatures hunched down just beyond the swamp cypress, their hands snatching at something lying in the bracken.

Emma's heart constricted. "He's there!"

Tink's response sounded like a bell with a broken clapper.

Sword out, Emma dive-bombed the gruesome quartet. With the sharp side, she sliced off half of one zombie's face. With the flat side, she turned another's wobbly head clear around. An instant later, she crash-landed into the two remaining, shattering them into a heap of flesh and bones. Emma stayed grounded just long enough to wrap her arms around Neal and take flight again. Tink remained behind.

Higher and higher Emma soared, scanning for a spot far enough from danger to tend her lover's injuries. When Neal groaned, she whispered, "I have you."

But when she looked down at him, she realized there was something she didn't have: the lower half of his right arm.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter uses some more dialogue from the episode "Queen of Hearts" (2x9), but this time Belle speaks up.
If You Let Me Go

Chapter Summary

Ruby considers August's black eye.
Emma considers Tink's request.
Belle considers Rumple's confession.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mary-Margaret Blanchard (Snow White): Even if you can't admit what you did, I forgive you anyway. (We Are Both)

When Ruby passed on Mr. Gold's message, August snickered. Baffled, she shook her head. "Well, I'm glad it's funny. I was afraid it might be some sort of, I don't know, threat?"

At that, August laughed so hard, he had to prop himself against the pine-paneled wall. "It is," he managed at last, then, "Hey, let me help you with—"

"I can handle my own zipper." With practiced ease, Ruby stuck out her elbow to block him. The story of how he'd gotten the reddish, purplish swelling over his right cheekbone had earned him points, but not enough for that. "Besides, I'm just poking my head in. I don't want you squirreling away my wrap in some closet where I can't find it when I want to go."

August contorted his mouth into a pout as Ruby shrugged off her red nylon jacket. Rolling her eyes, she sauntered over to the already stuffed coat rack. August kept in step, not an inch from her shoulder. Typical guy.

"At least stay long enough to see my Madagascar slides. You know, lemurs?"

Not finding a free hook, Ruby flung her jacket across the top and leaned her big, striped umbrella against the wall. Then she pivoted on her heel and crossed her arms. "You told me you saw them in Nepal. You lied."

August returned a hangdog smile. "The only lemurs in Nepal are in zoos." He held out his hands. "When I first came to Storybrooke, everyone was under the curse. I was testing you guys, seeing how good your earth info was."

Mine wouldn't have won me any money on Jeopardy, that's for sure. Ruby's store of local knowledge was what one would expect from the town slut. She knew shoe brands, the hottest knock-offs, club music, makeup tricks, and every detail of Johnny Depp's career. Until she'd met August, her familiarity with earth's wildlife had been on the level of a child's ABC book. Maybe Belle and I should start a get-to-know-your-earth study group. "Madagascar, Nepal, and now Singapore. You're just rubbing it in that you can travel and we can't."

August leaned forward. "I'll bring you back something."

"Yeah, sure." And Ruby knew just what it would be: perfume, jewelry, or a fancy silk scarf. The Storybrooke curse had also implanted a thorough education in men who wanted to get into her pants.
"How about a Wushu sword?"

Ruby's mouth opened. "What?" Now that would be different.

August raised an eyebrow. "I've heard, back in the day, you were quite the warrior."

Grinning, Ruby curled her fingers at him. "Fangs and claws. All a girl needs."

"I bet that got them howling."

Still grinning, Ruby shook her head. "A Wushu sword. It's not like I'd ever want to use it. Goodness, no. I hope I never have to use my fangs and claws like that again either. But still... Wouldn't a sword look cool hanging on her wall next to her crossbow? And trying it out would be fun. David favored the broadsword, but he could show her some moves. Good exercise.

Hooking her thumbs in the pockets of her vanilla white chinos, Ruby turned away. After a few steps, she peeked over her shoulder. August does have the most amazing blue eyes—especially with that bruise under them. Kind of a badge of courage. "I can't wait till I can visit places like Madagascar, Nepal, and Singapore, too."

Again, August closed the distance between them. "That's one of the reasons I asked Mr. Gold. Everyone wants to know how soon he'll figure out how to keep memories past the town line."

Ruby frowned. "I thought he was a guest. You're going to let people grill him?"

"Ah, come on. He can take it. Nobody's going to ask him a question without saying Sir in front of it—except me, of course. I mean... he's Mr. Gold."

"I don't know..." Can't the guy catch a break for one night? Ruby remembered how blissful he and Belle had looked—like between them they'd created a happiness spell. She was about to say so when she saw August's I've-taken-on-the-world swagger disappear. Suddenly, he looked like a little boy—unsure what he'd done, but sure there was something.

"Good evening, Ma'am."

Ruby turned to see Mother Superior gliding out of a back room, trailed by Geppetto. In the Enchanted Forest, the Blue Fairy had allied herself with Charming’s and Snow White’s rebellion—mustering a battalion of fire-lobbing fairies for the final battle—but she’d been too high up the chain of command for Red to ever have talked to her directly. In Storybrooke, Mother Superior sometimes dropped by Granny’s for a beer, but even then she commanded respect. Ruby glanced at August. His level of deference bordered on flustered.

"I'm so glad Mr. Gold is coming," Mother Superior said. "I have some questions for him myself."

August swallowed. "Uh, I doubt he'll actually show. I mean, Mr. Gold at a party? And if he does, it'll be really late. Way past the time the convent closes up for the night."

"Oh, Pinocchio. I don't have a curfew. What a silly idea." Mother Superior gave him a kindly smile. "And besides, I'm not a nun, I'm a fairy."

Emma chose the second lookout post to nurse Neal. The swaying hammock provided the gentlest haven possible for her brave hero's care. Blinking away her tears, she unzipped her jacket and tore a strip from her blouse. Filthy, but it will have to do. In jail, an impromptu how-to session from a fellow inmate had taught her the art of fashioning a tourniquet. Thank goodness I was there.
"Neal, Neal, what were you thinking?" she mumbled as she hurried to stem the loss of precious blood. "Why did you leave me?"

Emma couldn't see his face but, as he rasped out his words, she could hear his smile. "Leave you? Force of habit."

Emma whimpered. Oh, Neal. She knotted the ends of the tourniquet around a stick she'd cut and twisted it tight just above his elbow. "How come you didn't fly when they attacked?"

"Couldn't," Neal managed between breaths. "No dust."

"Really? I thought..." Oh, it doesn't matter. "I'm just grateful Tink sprinkled me." Though where she was now, Emma didn't know.

"So am I." Neal's voiced started to wheeze. "I'm grateful you... you had a... despite everything... happy thought."

"My happy thought was us reuniting. But now your—your hand. I don't know if I'll ever fly again."

Behind her, Emma heard tinkling. In a moment, a green glow illuminated Neal's face. He looked revolted.

"Tink," Neal said. "Why did you bring that?"

No sooner did Emma wonder what that was, than the quirky little fairy dropped it in her lap: Neal's hacked off forearm. Emma flinched.

Zigzagging an inch from her staring eyes, Tink jingled excitedly.

Neal raised his head. "You can't expect—"

Tink's answer was a clank.

"Please! What did she say? I don't understand."

"Fairies. Nuts. All of them." Neal collapsed back on the hammock. His words sounded woozy. "Tink says... you're the savior. She says... save my hand."

By the time Belle and Rumple stepped out of the dining tent, the lights decorating the booths had been switched off. Here and there through the slanting rain, she saw concessionaires wrapping up their goods in water-proof tarps by lantern or flashlight, but the walkway between was dark. Without any fanfare, Rumple produced his large black umbrella, already open, and handed it to her. Then he swung out his cane to limp away. Belle hastened to catch up.

That Rumple preferred to slog through the mud in silence didn't surprise her. The news that the Queen of Hearts sought passage to Storybrooke was disturbing. Not until they passed the first lamppost lighting the parking lot did Belle realize just how devastated he was.

Gone was the scornful disinterest Rumple had kept up until Regina, smirking and tossing her hair, had finally left them. Alone with him now, Belle saw he appeared more broken and lost than the day he'd given her the keys to the library and said goodbye.

Belle cleared her throat. Instead of looking at her, Rumple leaned forward on his cane and hobbled more quickly toward the borrowed Cadillac. Sighing, she followed.

Rumple's shamefaced manner during Jefferson's tragic tale had alerted her that he felt some
responsibility. Now that she knew he'd taught Cora her magic, she understood why. As for Regina's claims about Rumple's culpability for how her mother had used that magic—well, that was a different matter. For nearly thirty years, Belle had been the Evil Queen's prisoner. Who knew better than she how that woman could twist the truth?

So taking out a heart isn't just a Wonderland thing. That was a dark tale, indeed. If Rumple planned to remain silent about it, Belle wouldn't be happy. But I'll hold my tongue. This evening she'd promised to issue no more ultimatums—to instead show patience, listen, admit her own needs, and try to understand. If there was one thing Rumple had taught her, it was stand by your word.

Rumple opened the passenger door. As Belle ducked past him and slid onto her seat, he mumbled, "I'll take you home."

"Of course." That had been her plan all along—drop off her dress and her roses before they drove to August's party. As he rounded the Caddy holding the umbrella, she saw he was using it too late. The rain had already plastered his hair to his head. Poor boy. When we get to my place, I'll towel you dry. When he reached his door, she unlocked it from the inside then sat back as he eased himself, dripping, onto the driver's seat. When she saw him lift his bad leg with both hands to swing it into the car, she bit her lip. "Your old injury—"

"No matter." He started the engine and backed out.

Oh, Rumple.

When he maintained his silence for the three blocks from the community center to the library, Belle knew she had to be the one to break it. But how? As he pulled the Caddy to the curb, she took a deep breath. "I have a confession."

Slowly, Rumple turned his head.

"That year I spent in the Evil Queen's tower, she must have burst into my cell, ranting about something, oh, nearly a hundred times. I observed her, evaluated her, listened for clues—all those things you taught me to do with the people who came to beg favors. I figured out she adored her father, was estranged from her mother, had lost her first love, yearned for a child, was insanely jealous of you, and was clueless about why her subjects didn't worship her. But I couldn't bring myself to talk back—not even once. Tonight, I finally mustered the courage because you—"

"My fault." Rumple heaved a sigh. "If Regina hadn't wanted to get the better of me, she never would have imprisoned you. All the horrible things that have ever happened to you, they're my fault."

"That's not—" Belle's forehead wrinkled "—that's not what I meant."

"Please." Rumple held up a hand. "Let me explain. Selfish of me, I know. But one last indulgence before..." He hung his head. "That thing Regina mentioned. I don't want you to think I taught Cora that most personal, most irrevocable of all retributions, so she could crush the heart of a blameless stable boy—just because he had the audacity to love her daughter. Nor so she could become the Queen of Hearts, controlling her lords and ladies as if they were her deck of cards. Nor to carry out that final horror—turning her fallen enemies into zombie minions. That she would do any of that, I had no idea."

"No," Belle said softly. "I never thought you did."

Rumple leaned against the steering wheel. "Before we met, Cora had led an unbearable life. Regina
doesn't know. At first Cora put on such a show that neither did I. The one person she cared about was her mother. When someone hurt her mother—for the most arrogant, selfish, callous of reasons—Cora wanted revenge. I told her that if the harm done had been so horrendous, it felt like having her heart ripped from her chest, then she could use that emotion to return the harm in kind.”

Slowly, Rumple raised his chin. For a moment, he stared at the raindrops splashing the windshield. Belle stared at him. Just as she'd thought—another wrong-headed attempt at establishing equity outside the rule of law, an attempt Rumple now regretted. That rang truer than Regina's jeers.

"You may ask, how did I know?" He jiggled his head in a mockery of his usual flourish. "Because that was the emotion that empowered me on the occasion that I did it."

Belle inhaled sharply. As soon as she heard Rumple's declaration, she knew she should have realized it all along. *Some acts of magic can't be researched out of a book.* "Revenge," she ventured. "Society can't run properly if it's... condoned. But... I can understand it. Some injuries are so severe, they...they..." She let her voice trail off. From his increasingly jagged breaths, she knew both her disapproval and her sympathy were inadequate. Whatever wound he'd suffered, it had been critical. Someone must have hurt a loved one—mother, father, sister, brother—or perhaps his wife... the woman he never talked about, the one he'd said he'd lost, the one who'd borne his Baelfire.

"I won't discuss what I did. I can't. I've regretted it every day since and yet... the feelings that drove me, they remain." Rumple shook his head, his expression unreadable in the darkness. "But Cora... how did she take such ghastly magic and make it commonplace? How did she discard the central requirement: extreme, agonizing emotion?" He clamped a hand across his eyes. His next words came in a rush. "Instead of taking out the heart of the person who'd wronged her, she took out her own."

Belle gasped and folded her arms against her chest. "That's why everyone keeps saying... Cora has no heart."

Rumple nodded, his breath catching. "When I met her, she was a beautiful clever woman desperate to escape an awful life and ready to pretend, scheme, lie in order to do it—but she could still feel. By taking out her own heart, by locking it away in a box, Cora hoped to remove the last hindrance to doing whatever it took to fulfill her ambition to be a queen in the Enchanted Forest."

"But she failed."

"Because I blocked her." Again, Rumple hung his head. "When Cora married Prince Henry, I took comfort in the fact he was sixth in line. But when the crown prince died mysteriously, I saw her hand in it, improving her husband's position. So I acted. I cast spells of protection over the brothers still standing between Henry and the throne. They stayed mortal, of course, but she couldn't kill them. So she set her sights on a different kingdom. She waited years to make her move, but one day—without warning—she poisoned Queen Eva."

*Snow White's mother.* Belle shivered. Cora truly had become heartless. And now she wanted to come to Storybrooke. No wonder Rumple had looked devastated.

"I knew what her next play would be—make herself an eligible widow—so I cast a spell of protection over Prince Henry. But no matter what cards she's dealt, Cora can find a way to play them. She manipulated events for her daughter to marry King Leopold. What Cora planned to do after that, I'll never know. Regina and I banished her."

"To Wonderland." *Where she did things even worse.*

"Oh, Belle." Rumple exhaled slowly. "I promised not to lie to you—not even to misdirect—so I can't
let you think I protected the royals for some noble cause... to save the Enchanted Forest from a tyrant... to spare the princes' lives... No. My motive was personal: to thwart Cora. I did it because..."

His next words died in his throat.

Belle's head dipped like a flower wilting. Rumple's silence proclaimed the reason he had looked so lost and broken more loudly than words. "Because you were in love with her."

"No," he whispered. "I did it because she didn't love me."

Chapter End Notes

Personally, I think there're some secrets Rumple will never confess fully to Belle, but if he at least admits the secrets are there, that's progress.
Can't I at Least Know You?

Chapter Summary

Won't summarize this chapter; just read it.

Chapter Notes

After a slow burn, Rumbelle, Swanfire—as well as HopperOC—heat up. Hope it was worth the wait.

Jefferson the Mad Hatter: Remembering is the worst curse. (An Apple Red as Blood)

After supper, Archie showed Vincent the upstairs guest bedroom. He'd never had a visitor actually sleep there, but—for as long as he could remember—every other Thursday, he'd changed the sheets. This week brown plaid flannel topped with a forest green comforter would keep his friend snug and warm through the night.

Because I want to, but I know I can't. After less than two hours together, Archie could no longer deny his feelings—and he felt as if he were going crazy. I'm non-sexual, he repeated to himself. Like a dwarf or a fairy. Tonight, to be honest, he was revising his analysis.

He forced himself to assess the room, assure himself it was comfortable. Feather bed fresh and tidy? Check. Oak armoire clean and empty? Check. Antique cherry desk stocked with paper, pens, and pencils? Check. His survey led him to the room's pride-and-joy: his telescope. Right now, Vincent was crouched on the window seat, elbows on the deep, bay window sill, face pressed to the eyepiece, peering into the darkness.

Crikey, is he handsome. Aloud, Archie said, "Too bad it's—it's raining." He coughed. "We have an—an expression about Maine weather. If you don't—don't like it, wait a half hour. It'll change."

Vincent chuckled, acknowledging his joke like the dear sweet man he was. "No point looking at the sky, of course, but I'm getting a good idea of your shoreline. Your house is fantastically situated. You have a marvelous view."


"I can see the small craft harbor. Not many boats. Wrong season for—hello. What's that?" His friend continued staring through the telescope. "Why, if that's not the cutest... Awww... Arch, come here. You've got to see this."

Archie couldn't answer. Tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth? Check. Against his years of experience as a royal counselor, against his implanted psychological education and training, against every shred of common sense he possessed, he wedged himself onto the window seat beside
Vincent. After a deep, calming breath, he put his eye to the telescope.

At first, Archie saw a blur. He tweaked the eyepiece to accommodate his nearsightedness. Then he said, "Awww..."

Leroy was on the dock, ambling toward his houseboat. What made the sight so darling was what he was carrying—a woman in a fluffy pink skirt riding piggyback. He held her white-stockinged legs. One of her arms lifted a yellow umbrella over the both of them; the other hugged his chest. At first, Archie's mind drew a blank for who she possibly could be. Then she lay her cheek on Leroy's shoulder, turning her face enough to be recognizable.


Vincent laughed. "A nun? Are you kidding me?"

"Well, I guess, she's not—not really a nun... I mean, she wouldn't have taken—actually taken—vows. But she lives and works at the convent—the home for lost children—and... Oh, no!"

Just as Leroy raised a leg to board his boat, he slipped. He and Astrid tumbled onto the rain-slick dock. Through the telescope, they looked just yards away, and Archie felt guilty not reaching out to help. But then he saw they didn't need him. Grinning and laughing, they held each other. Then Astrid planted a boisterous kiss on Leroy's bearded face.

"Well, I'll be." The celibacy of dwarfs and fairies has been greatly exaggerated.

Vincent moved so close Archie could feel his breath on his ear. He continued gazing through the telescope.

By Tink's green glow, Emma studied Neal. Balled up in the treetop hammock beside her, he kept ping-ponging between moaning pain and glassy-eyed shock. Tamping down her nausea, she lowered her gaze to the dismembered forearm the fairy had dropped in her lap. One Storybrooke newsflash Henry had passed on via Aurora had starred Gold reattaching Dr. Whale's arm. So it can be done.

Whether by Emma was another question.

A few weeks ago, she had achieved magic. She'd awakened Henry from Regina's sleeping curse and awakened the memories of the entire town in the process. Pretty grand stuff—yet somehow the task before her looked more daunting. Hell, she didn't even know if Tink had brought all the pieces.

The itty-bitty fairy began zigzagging between Neal and a spot directly in front of Emma's eyes. She jammed her knuckles against them. Stop hassling me. I have to think this through.

On the day Henry fell into a coma, Gold had told her the cure: True love, Miss Swan... The only magic powerful enough to transcend realms and break any curse. Of course, his aim had been to finagle her into descending beneath the library to slay a dragon that held a bottle of her family's true love he needed for an ulterior purpose. He hadn't actually lied about how to save Henry—her loving motherly kiss had broken both curses—but, like the conniving son-of-a-bitch he was, he'd distracted her along the way to further his own agenda.

Gawwwddd. If only she had that son-of-a-bitch with her now. First, he'd mess with her head, sure. But after he'd extracted whatever favor he wanted, through some backhanded means, he'd help. He was a deal-maker. He always held up his end.
Poor Neal, stuck with relying on her. True love's kiss—that was the only magic trick Emma knew. She'd pulled it off once, mother-to-child. Could she use it on Neal? Tonight, he'd restored a lot of her trust. Fighting zombies with a guy had that effect. And his ridiculously gallant decision to face the rest of the horde alone had made her fly. But true love? Are either of us capable of that?

If Emma's kiss wasn't magical, Neal would make the best of it, but Tink would blame her and turn the Lost Boys against her, too. Not to mention, she'd feel rotten to the end of her days.

But I have to try.

Cora. As that name rumbled in Belle's mind, she recognized in herself an unbecoming urge—to slap that bitch of a witch senseless. She glanced at Rumple, his head still bowed over the steering wheel, and clasped her arms against her chest. For his sake, she had to master her indignation. After all, no matter how despicable Cora had been, Rumple had loved her. With an ex, one had to tread lightly.

"She's the one, isn't she? The one who told you that thing, that horrible thing you yelled at me before you kicked me out of your castle—that no one could ever love you."

Rumple shifted in his seat. "Cora was an insightful woman."

Insightful? Belle gritted her teeth. Insightful is not what she'd call knowing exactly which lie would inflict the most damage. The memory of her final hour in the Dark Castle filled her mind—of Rumple's face ravaged by anger and anguish more horrible than the green-gold mask of his curse. She shuddered, wishing she could shake the image out of her head. Tread lightly concerning Cora? Impossible. "Please. I have to get out of this car."

Sighing, Rumple nodded. As he opened his door, Belle twisted around to retrieve her roses from the backseat. Taking hold of their smooth, tender stems calmed her. Lovingly, he'd sheared off every thorn, leaving nothing but their beauty. As she buried her nose in their fragrance, she vowed to do the same for Rumple. At least we're talking. One can't remove thorns if one doesn't know where they are.

Rumple walked through the rain to her side of the car. Turning, Belle saw him awkwardly holding his umbrella and cane in one hand while opening the back door with his other.

"Let me help," Belle said, pushing her door open and scooting out to stand beside him. As she took the umbrella, he re-positioned his cane and leaned into the car. When he straightened up again, she reached out to link elbows—as they had throughout the fair—but instead of taking her arm, he draped her garment bag over it. Shrugging, she handed his umbrella back. "You'll have to carry this, so I can grab my keys."

As Belle crossed the sidewalk to the front door, she and Rumple remained out of sync. One moment the umbrella would dip down over her; the next, rain would spray her face. When she gained the wooden awning, he pulled away. Teeth chattering, she faced him. He was turning toward his car.

Belle's forehead pinched together. "Rumple... aren't you coming up?"

"I don't want to impose..."

"Nonsense." When Rumple slowly swiveled his head towards her, Belle frowned. "You're wet. You're cold. I've got towels, tea. You're coming up. We're not going to August's party with you shivering.

Without giving him time for another silly objection, Belle swung around to the front of the library,
fumbled in her jacket pocket, jigged her key in the lock, and opened the double doors. She stamped her ankle boots on the mat, then strode across the lobby, straight to the old-fashioned elevator to push the button. The intricate assemblage of gears and chains began rattling, and the brass doors slid apart. Behind her, she heard Rumple’s cane tapping the linoleum floor. *Good.*

The interior light flickered then brightened. Entering the metal cage, Belle turned around. For the first time since the community center parking lot, she could see Rumple clearly. As she’d feared, his skin looked ashen. Lines creased his forehead, and his eyelids were hooded. He needed to talk, and she was ready to listen—just as soon as she got him warm and dry.

Rumple stopped on the threshold, leaning heavily on his cane. "You don't have to invite me up. I don't need to be let me down easy. This time, I understand. This time, I accept it."

*This time?* Confused, Belle pressed back against the elevator wall. "What are you talking about?"

Rumple lowered his eyes. "The first time, Milah... my... Bae's mother... she tricked herself. When she realized I wasn't the man she'd thought I was, she realized she'd *never* loved me... I took it badly." He grimaced. "Cora... she tricked me into thinking she loved me, but the entire time she'd been playing a game. When I realized that, I played her game back."

Belle took a step forward. He held up a hand.

"But you... You've been nothing but open and honest and kind. And I—I've taken advantage of it. I tricked you into hoping the monster was gone. Now that I've been revealed, it's not your fault, you... you've realized that..." he took a halting breath "...that you *never* loved me."

Staring at him, Belle felt herself crumple. Instead of shouting the lie in her face, he was whispering it inside his own head: *No one, no one could ever love me.*

"Rumple." Belle dropped the garment bag and roses. Then she launched herself across the yard that separated them. Spreading her arms, she flung them around his neck. The force of her hug nearly toppled them both. She leaned back, pulling him with her against the side of the elevator—so close his face blurred.

*No crying,* Belle told herself and squeezed her eyes shut. Rumple became a sharp intake of air, a whiff of amber and sandalwood, damp hair grazing her cheek. Rising to tiptoes, she opened her lips on his. Every kiss they'd shared raced through her mind, from their first at the Dark One's spinning wheel through every one since in Storybrooke—the hopeful, the playful, the desperate—all melded together into the reckless *now.*

For an instant, Rumple hesitated inside her embrace. Then his arms came around her, gathering her up, claiming her, making her whole.

"Keep shaking, Tink." Emma had no idea whether the sparkles spraying from Tink's wand and disappearing into the torn flesh would do any good, but they couldn't hurt.

Satisfied, Emma closed her eyes to summon up the one thing she was pretty sure wielding this magic required: the proper state of mind. When she'd revived Henry, she'd been desperate. Her mind had overflowed with the happy life she wanted for him and the tragedy that it was lost forever. Her son was a hero. Heroes deserved happy endings.

Emma brushed Neal's dirty, matted hair off his forehead. *That's how I feel about you, too.*

If only she knew where his hacked-off forearm should be when she tried the magic.
Gingerly, Emma picked it up by the wrist. "Tink, hold this in place."

When the fairy fitted it against Neal, a faint glow appeared where the parts met. Promising.

Emma filled her lungs. Here goes. She flooded her mind with Neal Cassidy—all the wonderful things she knew about him, all the wonderful things she wanted for him. The emotions welled inside her until her body felt glowing. As her power surged, she bent down and locked her mouth on his.

*I love you, Neal.*

He stirred under her kiss. She worked her lips in a way she'd been missing for eleven years. His mouth opened in invitation. Then they were moving together.

Tink jingled hysterically.

*Maybe she's jealous after all,* Emma thought.

One of Neal's hands trailed through her tangled hair down to the nape of her neck. The slow, sensual massage she remembered so well from years before made her sigh. Then the other hand cupped the back of her head and pulled her closer.

Tears pricked Emma's eyes. Now she could guess what Tinker Bell was saying: *You did it. It worked.*
A Chance to Talk

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold ventures further into his often raised, never fulfilled promise to tell Belle everything.

Emma tells Neal everything she knows about Mr. Gold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Sheriff Graham (The Huntsman):** Look, can we please talk about this? I need you to understand.

*(The Heart is a Lonely Hunter)*

Mr. Gold took a sip of Darjeeling and eased his bad leg up onto the floral-print hassock Belle had set in front of her plush easy chair. She smiled at him. Instead of sitting down to drink her own tea, she padded in her blue-stocking feet across her wide loft apartment, chattering as she went.

He tried to keep pace with her. "This tea—I'd swear it came from Agrabah." "I see you're still faithfully conserving electricity. You've won me over to the practice." "You were right about the fair. I survived." "My raincoat? Ruined when the car bumped me." "Yeah, I should have worn it anyway. My vanity got me soaked." All the while he gazed at her, filled with disbelieving wonder. She hadn't given up on him—not tonight, anyway.

On the far side, Belle stepped from shadows back into lamplight. Seeing her tumbled hair turn from mahogany to copper, her last question fled Mr. Gold's mind, and his answer came out as a long sigh.

Belle threw him a curious glance then crouched to open a cedar chest at the foot of her bed.

His cheeks warming, Mr. Gold looked away to survey the spacious room. "Independence suits you. You've made a comfortable home. And you've furnished it with some quality pieces. That barrel-back cupboard—eighteenth century Shaker, if I'm not mistaken."

"I defer to Mr. Gold, Pawn Broker and Antiquities Dealer."

The grin in Belle's voice drew his gaze back to her. Watching her striding purposefully towards him, he set his teacup on the side table and reached out for the fluffy white towel tucked in her arms. She raised an eyebrow but continued walking until she was standing behind him.

When the towel came down over his head, Mr. Gold closed his eyes. Starting at his temples and working her way back, Belle briskly dried his hair. In three hundred years, he'd never felt this cherished. He wracked his brain for small talk. He couldn't think of a single thing.

"Rumple, I wish I could wipe away what Cora said to you. That you and I could be so close this evening, only to have your thoughts go there—it makes my heart ache."

"Oh, Belle..." His mouth moved slightly before he could continue. "It was that look on your face when Regina said what she said. I thought..."
"Hmm." She shimmied the towel across the nape of his neck. "How do you expect me to look when I hear some dark secret from your past, something you regret? Pleased?"

"Ach, no." *That would be like Cora—the darker, the better.* Reaching back, Mr. Gold found Belle's fingers. "Dismay, disapproval, expectation of something better—that's what I need to see from you."

Belle tousled his hair. "And love?"

Mr. Gold's throat tightened. Belle's words echoed Cora's—the brief moment she'd toyed with opening her heart to him... just before she'd ripped it out.

"Yeah, and love," he whispered, pulling Belle's precious hand to his lips. *Until I finally do something that drives you away for good.*

Neal and Emma lay cuddling the length of the hammock. Neal's gaze hovered between the marvel of her face in the moonlight and the marvel of the arm he'd looped around her. He glanced at the blissful curve of her lips then back at his fingers peeking up from behind her back. *Wow. Look at them wiggle.*

Emma laughed. "You're still trying your hand out, checking whether I do shoddy work?"

"No, I—it's just. Wow." After the Dark One curse took hold of him, his papa could do things like this. According to excited reports of the day he'd stopped the ogre war, Papa had strutted around the battleground restoring limbs right and left. What disturbed Neal now was recalling how short a time it had taken for his amazing powers to make Papa a man he no longer recognized.

*I don't have to worry about that with Emma, do I?*

"How long have you had this ability?" Neal asked.

Emma took his hand as if testing her workmanship herself. "Since birth, apparently, though I first used it a few weeks ago." She pressed his palm to her cheek. "My power is both awesome and strictly limited."

"Limited? By what?"

Emma wriggled around until her arms were resting on his chest and her face was poised above his. "Aren't there some zombies we should be whacking?"

A length of lank blonde hair slipped off her shoulder. He twirled it around his finger. "Tink can handle them. She's got an arsenal of fireworks you wouldn't believe."

"So that's what she was jangling on about before she flittered off."

"You didn't know?"

Emma sank down, pressing her cheek against Neal's heart. "I don't understand fairies like you and the boys. I don't understand birds like my mother. And I don't understand ogres like Rumplestiltskin."

At Papa's name, Neal tensed. "So... you've heard of Rumplestiltskin."

"Heard of him? I know him. As sheriff, I got to know him a bit too well. I even arrested him once, but of course he wangled his way out of the charges."
"Charges? Neal swallowed hard. "You never told me you knew Rumplestiltskin."

"Because that name's a mouthful. I call him by his Storybrooke name: Gold."

"Now I really am too much bother," Rumple murmured.

"Nonsense." Belle edged her chair closer. Not after all the TLC you gave me those first days out of the psych ward. Omelets in bed, Saint-Saëns on the stereo, roses on the nightstand. Gently, she slid up his trouser cuff and rolled down his sock. As always, seeing his old injury made her want to wince—the bump where a bone fragment had fused in the wrong place, the twist where his shin had healed but not quite straight. Instead, she pursed her lips, determined not to blanch at the painful, red flesh. Her job was to relieve it.

"This is the closest to an ice pack I have," Belle said, draping a 32-ounce bag of frozen stir fry across the swelling. "That you received such shabby care for this break—it makes me mad."

Rumple chuckled softly. "I brought it on myself. The only one to be mad at is me."

Belle met his eyes but didn't ask the obvious—despite how badly she wanted to know. Someday, in his own good time, he'd tell her.

Smiling, Rumple glanced aside. "Monday I had supper with Geppetto. Unexpected, really. He asked about my leg, and I told him. I can't think why I never told you. When I was little, I worked for a master shearer. One day, when I was herding sheep into the pen, lightning spooked them, and I was trampled."

"Poor little boy." In her mind, Belle could hear the bone snap. "You thought you'd brought the lightning on yourself."

Rumple blinked. Then he wrapped a hand around his lower face, and his eyes searched hers. Belle's eyebrows pulled together. "That's not all, is it?" Averting her gaze, she adjusted the makeshift ice pack. "Never mind. You don't have to tell me."

When she looked up again, Rumple spread out his hands. "That injury was significant. Because of it, the shearer stopped paying my father, and he was forced to take me back. At his earliest opportunity, he sold my services to two spinsters. I never saw him again."

"Hmph." Belle clenched her teeth. "Someone else I need to slap—Rumple's father."

"The spinsters taught me the wheel. They were patient with me. I have no complaints. My leg healed reasonably well with the left just a fraction shorter than the right—but that was only my first injury. The second, oh, the second—I don't know if I can talk about the second."

"Mm." Belle reached for the rolled stretchy bandage she'd found in the library's first aid kit. Time to apply compression. Instead, her mind flashed to that malicious witch, and she sucked air through her teeth. When anxiety flickered across Rumple's face, she shook her head. "I'm upset, but not at you. It's Cora. She's the reason you can't talk about things—not even about hurting your leg."

Rumple's mouth opened. Then he spoke. "You're right. There wasn't a tale I told her that she didn't eventually use against me. Whenever I start to speak, that memory haunts me." He rubbed his forehead. "If I tell you this secret—how my leg became a mangled mess—it will lead to the crux, to how my life became a mangled mess."
More than once, Rumple had pledged to tell her everything. That was the one promise he could never rally himself to keep. On the brink, he always wavered. *Yet each time he tells me a little bit more.*

Gazing into Rumple's troubled eyes, Belle laid her hand on his. "Only if you want to."

He drew a deep breath. "Tonight, I do."

When Emma snuggled back against Neal, the treetop hammock swayed. The motion made spooning a particularly delightful, particularly agonizing position, but since she didn't know how long their unexpected privacy would last, she couldn't take full advantage of it.

"I don't suppose," said Emma, "you have an idea how long Tink'll be gone."

"She's unpredictable. I'd hang a sock on a branch, but I doubt she'd understand the reference."

Neal's breath on Emma's ear sent a delicious shiver down her spine. *Have to get my mind on something else.* "Remember, before the zombies so rudely interrupted, I was going to tell you some of my dastardly Gold stories?"

"Uh-huh. That seems ages ago."

"From what I heard, this Mr. Gold doesn't seem *all* bad. I mean, he made August a flesh-and-blood man again."

Emma snorted. "For what price, I'd like to know."

At first, Neal didn't respond. When he did, his words were subdued. "There's nothing wrong with payment for services. That's *equity*. Fair trade preserves dignity. For both parties. Deals are... the cornerstone of civilization."

"Seriously?" Emma laughed. "Now you sound like Mr. Gold." Not the carefree vagabond whose shoplifted swan pendant still hung around her neck next to the enchanted compass. "I don't say making deals is wrong. I just don't think proper payment is a baby."

"A...baby?"

"That's what my first run-in with Gold was over—a deal for a baby. Just like in the fairy tale. Isn't that creepy?"

When Emma felt Neal shudder, she suspected he agreed.

"To Duke Angus's credit, he ran his campaign with the intention of defeating the ogres—not like his son years later. To serve him was an honor, but my wife never pushed me to seek a commission. Milah said I was too short. But I saw the way she looked at the soldiers in their black doublets, their shiny helmets, their gleaming chain mail. I wanted to give her the bragging rights that came with being wed to a warrior. Even more, I wanted that for myself, so I joined."

*Rumple a soldier? Following orders?* That's the last thing Belle would have thought—but since she didn't know where his story was heading, she knew better than to express an opinion. "Mm."

"In those days, I didn't require a walking stick, but I still wasn't light on my feet, so mostly they assigned me to logistics—managing the supply lines, maintaining the records, minding the stores. Then one day, I was told to guard a wagon."
Rumple's expression grew pensive, and he picked up his half-empty teacup from the side table. Belle knew it was cold, but he drank it anyway.

"The wagon was covered, but from its shape, I guessed it was a cage. The officer said it held a tricky beast that could turn the tide of battle and to guard it with my life. But when he left, the sound I heard from beneath the shroud was not an animal—it was a child calling, 'Rumplestiltskin.'" He leaned back. "As you can imagine, I was curious. What I saw when I lifted the drapery appalled me. Someone had sewn up the poor girl's eye sockets. When she held out her hands, I saw why. In the middle of each palm, blinking at me, was an eye."

"She was a seer." Belle laced her fingers under her chin.

Rumple nodded. "Immediately, she proved her powers by tallying my past—my father, the spinsters, my wife. Then, in exchange for a dipper of water, she told my future: that Milah was pregnant with a son but that my actions on the battlefield would leave him fatherless." He paused, as if watching for her reaction.

Belle met his gaze. "That must have been awful: joy and despair in the same message."

"A baby. One I was destined to never see." Rumple released his breath. "At first I denied the seer's warning. My battlefield role had always been to support the archers—check the fletching on the arrows, restring the bows, restock the quivers. When she said that on the morrow, I'd ride a cow into battle, I decided her fortunetelling was a joke."

"But it wasn't, was it? Cow is an obscure term for a leather saddle."

"My wonderful well-read Belle." Rumple nodded again. "When I learned that, come morning, we'd be mounting a charge into the ogres' camp and I'd be part of it, I reckoned the seer was right about everything: because of some foolish mistake on the battlefield, I would wrong my son as I had been wronged. In vain pursuit of glory, I would condemn him to growing up without a father."

Belle sunk her elbows to her knees and her chin to her knuckles. She recalled the first confession Rumple had ever made to her—perched like a gnome on the edge of the grand banquet table in the Dark Castle. There was a son. I lost him, miss... as I did his mother. In her mind's eye, she could see his situation so clearly. "The prophecy was inevitable. The next day, you weren't killed in battle, but you were injured. And because of your handicap, Milah left you."

"Not so neat and tidy as that, I'm afraid." Rumple gave her a strange smile, part mockery, part resignation. "I was always one for loopholes—even then. I believed only death could keep me from my child. If that fate awaited me on the battlefield, then I decided I just wouldn't go." He flourished his hand. "Before dawn, before the camp roused itself to fight, I picked up one of the iron-headed mallets used to pitch tents. Swinging that mallet with all my might, I shattered my leg."

"Cinderella was pregnant for twenty-nine years?"

Even though Neal was a guy, Emma could hear oh-my-god sympathy in his voice. "Not just pregnant. Really pregnant. Time started ticking when I got to Storybrooke. Ella—or Ashley, as she's known there—delivered just a few weeks later."

"Wow." Neal blew out his breath. Emma felt it rustle her hair. "This contract Mr. Gold had with her—that was to find a family to adopt, wasn't it? That's not sinister. In exchange for—"

"Who the hell knows? Certainly, not money. When I met her, Ashley wasn't lounging like a princess. She was stuck in the first half of the fairy tale: doing laundry and scrubbing floors at
Granny's Bed and Breakfast." Being pregnant in jail was tough, but at least it didn't last twenty-nine years. "Despite her circumstances, she changed her mind. She decided to keep her baby."

Neal's voice was low. "But nobody breaks a deal with Rumplestiltskin." Then he added, "Or so I've heard."

So the guy already had a rep when Neal was a kid. Why am I not surprised? "I don't know what scams that shark got away with here, but in Maine, he could never have enforced a contract for a baby. The problem is Ashley complicated things. She maced Gold in his own shop."

Behind Emma, silence. Then, "That took guts."

"And lack of common sense. If Gold had pressed charges, that baby would have been shipped off to foster care while her Mom sat in jail." Like Henry. "Instead, I got him to back off."

"From a deal? How did you manage that?" Neal sounded impressed.

Just like Gold. Emma smiled. She could almost hear him in Neal's voice: I like you, Miss Swan. You're not afraid of me, and that's either cocky or presumptuous. Either way, I'd rather have you on my side. "Well, partially by a threat. I pointed out going to court might uncover dealings he'd prefer kept private. And partially by a promise..." She let her voice trail off. Due to the urgency of the situation—waiting outside the delivery room—she may have given in too hastily on this last point. "I owe him a favor."

Chapter End Notes

I would have liked to actually see Rumple finally tell Belle everything (or nearly everything).

Sorry about not sticking to my posting schedule. :( When something else comes up (this time, trying to meet the deadline for a writing challenge on Wattpad), everything is thrown off. I'll be switching to a two-chapters-a-week schedule (which I will try my very best to keep): Thursday and Saturday. Is that a good choice?

Thank you for reading!
You Will Know I Speak the Truth

Chapter Summary

Rumple and Belle, Emma and Neal continue to share...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold)**: I am nothing like my father! He tried to abandon me. I will never, ever do that to my son. That’s why I did this. For him. All for the boy. To save him from the same fate I suffered – growing up without a father. (*Manhattan*)

When Belle cringed and clutched her own shin, Mr. Gold gnawed his lip. *Why didn't I keep that story to myself?* He'd indulged in a bid for pity—shameful for him, unfair to her.

Catching his eye, Belle winced. “I'm sorry. I have a ridiculously intense imagination. You're the one who suffered, not me—the one who is still suffering.”

Now Belle was brimming with compassion—as usual, misspent on him. Mr. Gold waved it away. “No matter. As I said, I brought this on myself. How can I complain? I got exactly what I bargained for—the chance to raise my son.”

Slowly, Belle straightened up in her chair, smoothed down her plaid skirt, and folded her hands in her lap. “I'm good. I'm listening.”

*Ach, she expects more.* Mr. Gold steeled himself to continue. “Well, execution was mentioned, and setting my leg seemed a waste of everyone’s time, so I had to do it myself. For months, I sat caged like the seer had been, until finally, Duke Angus came to hear my side. As a ruler, he couldn’t condone a soldier putting family above country, but as a father, he could understand, so he released me, saying, 'Now your true punishment begins.'”

Mr. Gold felt a knot in his chest. *At last we have it—the core of the affair. And here am I, putting Belle on the spot.*

“What do you mean ‘true punishment’?” Belle asked, though from the look in her eyes, Mr. Gold suspected she knew.


“Not even Milah?”

“Especially not Milah.”

Belle's forehead stitched together. “I believe you.”

Mr. Gold stared into her clear blue eyes, wishing he could see what she was seeing.

“You won't take my answer on faith, will you?” Belle stroked his hand. “Then take it on logic. After
all these years, if you wanted to lie, you'd have picked the one I offered—handicapped with valor on the battlefield. Instead, you told a story begging to be doubted. Only a fool wouldn't believe you.”

Mr. Gold pinched the bridge of his nose. A quarter of a millennium, and the hundred reasons to call him a liar had faded. Trust Belle to have the wisdom to point that out. Lowering his hand, he offered her a faint smile. “To remind me of my folly, they gave me the mallet handle to use as my staff. After six days and six nights, I staggered into my hut. The moment I saw Baelfire in Milah's arms, I knew I'd made the right choice.”

Belle nodded.

“But I couldn't prevent the gossip. My only recourse was not to mind. If the shearmen sold me their wool and the tailors bought my thread and cloth, then what did it matter how they talked about me?” Mr. Gold hunched his shoulders. “But Milah felt otherwise.”

Belle's expression grew stern. “What did that woman do?”

Milah's rebukes rattled around Mr. Gold's head, and for a moment, he couldn't answer. A true father would have given his son something better than the village coward. A true lover wouldn't have to bed his woman lying on his side. A true husband would have made his wife an honored widow instead of a laughingstock. A true man would have died.

Mr. Gold shrugged. “She became dissatisfied.”

Neal scrambled up to the branch that supported the rocking hammock with Emma close behind. As she settled beside him, he said, “We can watch for Tink better from here.” And when she comes, we'll tell her how long to stay away.

Emma leaned into him. “So, which story next: Valentine's Day or Heart in a Box?”

Neal scowled. “Is that second one what it sounds like?” According to Snow, removing hearts was Cora's specialty. Surely, Papa couldn't do that.

“You're right.” Emma chuckled. “We've had enough detached body parts for tonight. Valentine's Day it is.”

The holiday of chocolates and flowers. With Papa involved, Neal suspected the tale wouldn't be so sweet. He’d thought him changing back to human on the outside meant he'd changed back on the inside as well. Evidently, the imp stayed put.

“This story starts in the morning with Gold and his hired giant—Dave the Dove—calling on Moe French. Trust Gold to pick the florist's biggest day of the year to repossess his van.”

Knowing Papa, Neal was sure he was strictly within his rights. Which made it no less of a jerk move.

“As you can imagine, Moe is pissed. He goes to Gold's house and breaks in. Maybe he meant to look for his keys. Instead, he loots him. A neighbor calls both me and Gold. When I get there, the door's open, so I burst in, gun out. What do I see? Gold leaning on his cane, pointing a gun at me.”

You're lucky it wasn't a fireball.

“I keep mine trained on him until he lowers his. Then he tells me he knows who robbed him and he'll take it from here. Well, that sounds ominous. When I insist, he finally tells me about Moe.”
Neal rubbed his chin. “Can you believe it? We used to be thieves. Now you're catching them.” August said you'd do better if I wasn't around.

Emma laughed. “Want to know the headline Regina had printed in the local paper when I ran for sheriff? 'Ex-Jailbird Emma Swan Birthed Babe Behind Bars.'”

Neal felt the words like a punch to his gut. He groaned.

Emma draped her arm across his shoulders. “You're not quite off the hook for that one.” She gave him a squeeze. “Anyway, at Moe's shop Storybrooke's ex-thief Sheriff finds four cartons of trinkets but no Moe. When I call Gold to the station to collect his stuff, instead of thanking me, he gripes. 'You've recovered nothing. There's something missing.' Out he stomps, looking like he wants to kill someone.”

Neal's forehead knit together. But he didn't, did he? Emma would have said.

“The rest of the day, as I cruise around, I keep an eye out for Moe—not just 'cause he's a suspect but 'cause I fear for his life. Patrolling the forest loop that night, I see the Game of Thorns van—parked beside a cabin Gold owns. When I get out, I hear him shouting. 'She was innocent.' 'You hurt her.' 'It's your fault she's gone.' 'Your fault.'“

“Wow.” She?

Emma nodded. “When I get inside, I see Moe tied up and Gold whaling on him with his cane. Well, I grab his wrist before he can strike another blow.”

Neal gasped. “That really took guts.”

“Yup, the mother of your son is a badass.” Emma patted his knee. “I send Moe off in an ambulance. Gold lets me arrest him—but he insists his motive for the beating was the theft, not a woman. As it turned out, in a way, he was telling the truth.”

Neal hung his head. He recalled the image Reul Gorm had shown him of Papa in Storybrooke—quietly spinning at his wheel. The hope that vision had given him was a lie. No matter his current form, Papa was still the Dark One. Nobody steals from Rumplestiltskin.

“Gold spends the night in jail. The next morning, before we leave for arraignment, the mayor shows up. I take Henry for ice cream so Regina can talk to Gold in private. When I return, he's sitting in his cell where I left him, but now he's holding something: a chipped china cup. That was the item Moe stole that Gold was so desperate to recover.”

Good grief. Papa sent a man to the hospital over damaged tableware?

Emma nestled her head on Neal's shoulder. “But later I found out I was right, too. The reason the chipped cup was so valuable to Gold was a woman—the woman it helped him remember.”

Mr. Gold fidgeted with his moonstone ring. Milah. How did I let myself stray to such a treacherous topic? He stole a glance at Belle. To avoid staring at him, she was smoothing the ruffles on her red blouse. Sensitive as always. If he unfolded the saga of the spinner and his wayward wife, he knew his darling Belle would be supportive, angry on his behalf, ready to do battle—so long as he avoided the climactic scene. There lurked a monster that would, if he let it, kill her love once and for all.

But I want her to understand why I became the Dark One. And a large part of why was Milah.
Mr. Gold drummed his fingers on his armrest. “There's little to say. I contented myself with spinning and weaving.” And cleaning and cooking and caring for Bae. “Milah developed her own interests.” Drinking and gambling and carousing with other men. “One evening, when Bae was five, I came home from market day to find him crouched by the fire. I took him with me to wait by the tavern door while I fetched his mother.” As I did several times each week. “Instead of her usual crowd, Milah was sitting at a table of seafarers.” Thieves, cutthroats, pirates. “She seemed animated… until she saw me. When her new friend, Captain Killian Jones, asked who I was…” she said, Nobody. Only my husband. Mr. Gold cleared his throat. “…well, Milah demonstrated one of Storybrooke's many advantages over the Enchanted Forest: instead of acrimony, one can choose divorce.”

“Oh, Rumple.” Belle sounded as pained as she had when he'd described fracturing his leg. Time to push this story along.

“At first Milah wasn't going to leave her new friends. Then Bae walked in, and reluctantly, she came home with us.” Where I served her comfrey tea in bed. “That's the last time my boy ever saw his mother.”

“She ran off with the seafarers?”

If only I'd had the good sense to realize that at the time. “Let me tell you how things were presented to me. The next morning my wife went out early. Soon after, a neighbor—her closest friend—knocked on the door. 'Rumplestiltskin,' she said, 'The men who came into port, they've taken Milah. They're setting sail. Hurry.'“

At the memory, pain shot up Mr. Gold's leg. It helped him focus. “Well, I hurried. By the time I reached the ship, I'd fallen several times and twisted my good ankle. On board, I lost my footing and crashed to the deck. As I struggled to stand, who do I see smirking down at me? Captain Jones. I begged him to free Milah—not for my sake, but for her son's. 'I have a ship full of men that need companionship,' he said then dropped a sword at my feet. Me, a peasant clutching a staff in hopes of not falling on his face, and Captain Jones proposed we duel. He called it his code of honor.”

Mr. Gold nearly spat out the last words. He couldn't help himself. Embarrassed by his loss of restraint, he reached for his teacup then remembered it was empty.

Belle grimaced. “I hate bullies.”

Mr. Gold returned a one-shoulder shrug. “The captain's offer was a farce, of course: walk away, live, and I keep your wife, or fight, die, and I keep your wife. My only real choice was whether to leave Bae with one parent or no parent, so I stumbled off that ship. To this day, I'm certain I made the right decision—but my reason for doing so isn't so clear, not like when I crippled my leg. Did I retreat from the duel because I was a dutiful father making the hardest decision of his life? A pragmatist accepting the lesser of two evils? A browbeaten husband getting his own back by abandoning his harpy wife to a fate worse than death? A coward terrified of being gutted like a fish? Or a worm without any choices at all?”

Emma glanced sidelong at Neal, wishing she could read him better in the moonlight. What reason did he have to suddenly doubt her story? Frankly, she found it annoying. “I've heard Gold was a little odd-looking here in the Enchanted Forest, but I don't see why that rules out a girlfriend—especially when I tell you who she is.”

Neal folded his arms. “I'm listening.”

Now Neal reacted. And his reaction was a lot stronger than Emma had expected.

“Oh, lord. That Belle. I saw the cartoon. Isn't she a teenager? And Gold is fifty?” He shifted his weight. “At least, that's how old August said he was.”

Emma laughed. “Don't worry. Reality's a little less weird. Belle's a year older than my mother. Thirty-one. But she's a bookworm, Mary-Margaret says, just like in the movie, and I can attest, she's also a beauty.”

Neal made a rude noise. “With a man old enough to be her father.”

Emma peered at him curiously. “If you knew Gold, you wouldn't find that surprising.”

Neal's head swung toward her at that one.

Emma rolled her eyes. “Gold's the richest, most powerful man in town. Guys like that can get a barely legal babe, if they want. I give him props for picking someone with a bit more class.”

“Sure,” Neal said, “but what in the world does she see in him?”

Really? Emma shook her head. Neal deserves what I’m about to say. Neal deserves what I'm about to say. “Well, for one thing, he's hot.”

Neal grunted.

“Not tall, dark, and handsome hot. More short, slim, and sexy hot. If I weren't so pissed at him, I'd admit he has an intensity some women might find attractive. You just know that when he commits, he commits. That kind of passion either makes him the perfect stalker, or it makes him the perfect one-and-only, forever-and-ever true love.”

Neal pressed a palm against his face. “Stop. I can't take this.”

“Don't worry. I have zero interest in guys like that. Too risky.” Emma clapped a hand on Neal's back. A bit less possessiveness suits me just fine. “Belle has qualms, too. I met her briefly when she ran crying out of his shop—after she learned Gold had conjured the wraith to avenge her.”

Neal slid his hand down until it grasped his chin. “The wraith that brought you here?”

“Right. It turns out Regina, not Moe, hurt Belle. That soul-stealing wraith was Gold's revenge.”

Chapter End Notes

These chapters of alternating backstory re-tellings were in my mind early in the writing of this story. When I decided it would be fun to have Jefferson drop by Rumple and Belle's table, to have Archie's "college friend" actually show up in Storybrooke, to have a scene between Regina and Charming, to turn Smee into a rat--well, all of that lengthened the Storybrooke thread significantly. Adding zombies to lengthen the Fairy Tale Land thread wasn't in the original plan, but it should have been. Sharing confidences is the secret to helping Rumple and Belle get closer. I think Emma and Neal needed to share action and danger.
Thoughts?
Everything You Love

Chapter Summary

I'm embarrassed to say that chapters were posted out of order. This chapter proceeds "Tell Me Honestly."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin):** Yeah, well, I'm a difficult man to love. *(Skin Deep)*

When Rumple had begun his tale, two lines had appeared in his forehead. With each new incident he'd related, they'd deepened. Now his face was tensed into creases and ridges as stiff as a mask. Belle's arms ached to hug him, but she knew she had to let him talk.

Rumple glanced at her then hung his head. "Those questions tormented me for years because frankly, I didn't want them answered. I was afraid of myself—of discovering what I truly am. And that fear made me what everyone thought I was—a coward."

*That word.* In the past, every time the prospect of getting close to Rumple had ended with him shutting her out, Belle had vented her frustration. Now she had the sickening realization her reproaches had been the worst ones possible: *You're a coward, Rumplestiltskin. You need courage to let me in. You're too cowardly to be honest with me.* As the daughter of Sir Maurice, commander of the garrison, she'd grown up with bravery the most vaunted virtue. Well, it took many forms.

"In circumstances like those," she said softly, "it took courage just getting up in the morning."

A smile twitched Rumple's lips. He shook his head. "I'm not forgetting that when Regina had you locked up, you had nobody and nothing to hang your hopes on. In the dark time I'm describing, I always had Bae."

*Until you lost him.* Belle remembered the child's clothing she'd come across in the Dark Castle that had prompted Rumplestiltskin's confession—a gray tunic the size of a five-year-old, a brown homespun shirt for a young teen.

"Well, now that I've started telling this..." Rumple rubbed the back of his neck. "Duke Angus died, and the son he loved so much that he could understand a battle-shirking father—his son Argus—became the worst despot the Frontlands ever saw. Instead of grown men attracted by commissions, he filled his ranks with children conscripted by press gangs—the firstborn of each peasant family the day they turned fourteen. Training them didn't matter. The goal of their service was to die. Duke Argus said the one thing peasants were good at was making babies. They could afford to lose one."

"That's awful. Nobody feels that way. Every child is precious."

Rumple nodded. "Earlier this evening, I was called upon to reverse a fertility potion. But I was told in no uncertain terms that the seventeen children already in the family were not so many that their mother and father didn't know what to do. As for me, I only had one. His coming birthday filled me with dread."
The Frontlands Massacres—that was the war in which Baelfire had been expected to serve, the war that Rumple had stopped. Belle was about to learn the link between the quiet spinner he had been and the all-powerful Dark One he became. She sat so still, she barely breathed.

"The neighbor girl, Morraine, was three days older than Bae. When Captain Hordor and his men came for her, they brought backup—a sorcerer able to place a stranglehold on the poor child's parents from across the pastureland. No one could withstand him. That night I scraped together our meager savings, woke Bae, and set out to flee to the next realm. At the edge of the forest, we chanced upon an old tramp. I barely had time to give him alms before I heard riders approaching. I told Bae to get off the road, out of sight, but already it was too late. Captain Hordor and his men surrounded us."

Rumple released a long sigh. "Well, Hordor recognized me as the man who'd lamed himself to avoid battle so many years before. He dismounted and ordered his men to seize my son for service immediately. Stunned, I asked what I could give him to keep Bae for the two days before his birthday. I'll never forget Hordor's reply: 'What do I want? You have no money, no influence, no land, no title, no power. The truth is, all you really have is fealty. Kiss my boot.'"

Belle's stomach twisted. "That's vile. And in front of your son."

"I confess, I wanted to kill the pack of them, but I couldn't even object—not if I wanted to hang on to Bae, so I accepted the humiliation. I lowered myself to the ground. I kissed the captain's boot."

Belle rubbed her hand against her mouth. Then she clenched it into a fist

"But Hordor was wrong. When someone is truly and utterly desperate, even a peasant—lame, friendless, weak—has something left to give. His soul."

Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Vincent had made Archie's last hour an agony of bliss. True, they hadn't left the window seat, but they hadn't left the guest bedroom either. They'd been too busy reminiscing about their graduate school days. Archie knew the events were pure fantasy, but that didn't stop him remembering them. From Archie's bulldog puppy Violet who'd ungraciously bitten Vincent on the ankle to their tearful farewell at the Albany railway station when Archie left his clinical fellowship to take care of his ailing parents—as soon as his friend mentioned an anecdote, the memory was clear for him as well.

Vincent rested his hand on Archie's arm. "When I got your friend request, the memories welled up and I had to see you again." He cocked his head and smiled. "Though I blame you for us losing touch. As I recall, you said your parents were difficult but you'd work things out, so we could go traveling. Then you sort of... vanished."

Archie stared at Vincent, at a loss for words. This recollection wasn't false, merely transposed—an echo of a promise made and broken to another man. The old despair took hold of him and, unable to stop himself, he blurted out, "My—my parents. They weren't just difficult. They were criminal. Con artists. They were as impossible to leave as—as the Mafia." The emotionally-controlling, guilt-provoking mafia.

Vincent's eyebrows rose. "You never told me."

"How could I? They made me—made me a criminal too. The family business. I was desperate—to change my life. But I saw no way." When his words petered out, he found he was hyperventilating.
"Oh, Arch."

He took a gulp of air. *What's wrong with me?* Screwing his eyes shut, Archie clenched his fist and banged it against his forehead. "I've never told that to anybody before." Not even the Dark One. Rumplestiltskin had just known.

Vincent's arm came around his shoulders.

Archie trembled. "I'm sorry—never mind... that was a long—" *long, long, long* "—time ago."

"I don't believe 'never mind'—not when you're still beating yourself up over it."

_You have no idea... and neither does anybody else._ Archie felt a lump in the back of his throat. As the only psychologist in Storybrooke, he was privy to everyone's remorse, doubts, and fears—from young Henry to the Dark One himself. When he needed to confide his own problems, he had no one. _Until now._ An inexplicable magic had provided him with an understanding outsider. Who better to hear his confession?

Archie repeated to himself his rules for relating anecdotes to Vincent: disguise identities, substitute earth versions for Enchanted Forest problems, and hold back the really bad stuff.

Taking a deep breath, he began.

---

Mr. Gold glanced at Belle. The compassion on her face unsettled him. He dipped his head until his hair shielded his eyes. *The full story, he told himself. Now or never.*

"Hordor laughed and kicked me in the jaw. Then he mounted his horse and galloped away with his men, down the forest road—cutting off any chance of flight to a kinder realm. Baelfire tried to pull me up, but I couldn't bring myself to stand. Then the tramp I'd given alms came hurrying toward us. Somehow, he knew our troubles. He said that if I gave him shelter, he would find a way to save my son."

Mr. Gold sighed. "As he drew me to my feet, I clung to one last shred of manhood—that I could protect my boy without resorting to help from a beggar."

Belle reached out. Mr. Gold waved her back. _When she hears the tale's end, she may not be so sympathetic._

"From dawn till dusk, I sought an escape—smuggle Bae out in a hay wagon, contract him to work in the salt mines, disguise him as a hunchback in a traveling show—anything, so long as it took him far away from Hordor's press gang. If Captain Killian Jones had been docked in the harbor, I'd have begged him to let my boy become a pirate rather than see him dragged off to face the ogres. But every course I tried was futile..."

"That night, after Bae was in bed, I brought a bowl of our broth to the beggar. Unable to help myself, I poured out my heart—that without my boy, my life would be dust..." Mr. Gold shuddered. "That's when the old man told me the secret of the Dark One."

Belle's forehead pinched together. "The sorcerer who kept a stranglehold on your neighbors, so Hordor could take their daughter—that was him?"

"Yeah. The beggar told me that sorcerer held more magic than anyone in the whole Enchanted Forest, but the Duke of the Frontlands kept him in thrall. If I could get my hands on the mystical dagger that bore his name, then _I_ would be his master." Mr. Gold paused. *Ironic.* Three sworn
enemies—Reul Gorm, Cora, and Regina—had known the source of his magic for years, yet tonight was the first time he was revealing it to the woman he loved, so loath had he been for her to learn the second half of the secret. "When I balked at the idea of enslaving such a terrifying being, the beggar told me of another way to save my son—kill the Dark One with the dagger and take his powers myself."

Mr. Gold's eyes flickered toward Belle's. She looks attentive, not appalled. Not yet, anyway. Slowly, he released his breath.

"I told myself the sorcerer was a monster, that he deserved to die for helping Hordor snatch our children, that if I had his magic, I would save them instead..." Mr. Gold closed his eyes "...but I had another motive, one I didn't tell Bae, one I scarcely admitted to myself... I was heartsick of being wretched, vulnerable, weak. For the first time in my life, power was within my grasp. I hungered for it, no matter the price."

"Oh, Rumple."

Twisting his moonstone ring, Mr. Gold willed himself to go on. "The next day I committed crimes I'd never imagined—set a fire to make the Duke's men open the castle gates, used the commotion to sneak in, and stole the cursed dagger from the Duke's private chamber. In the dead of night, I retreated deep into the forest and summoned the sorcerer named on the blade. When Zoso appeared, my resolve faltered. I tried to command him. He taunted me. In the end, I made a stone of my heart and plunged the dagger into his. Lo and behold, as the green-gold cast left Zoso's body and took hold of mine, he laughed. Then I realized whom I had stabbed. It was the beggar."

Belle's eyes widened. "He wanted you to kill him."

*He tricked me into a deal I didn't understand.* Over the centuries, as the Dark One, he'd felled many but as a hapless peasant, only one. Even now he could recall his nausea at discovering he'd murdered not a monster but a man. "When I asked, 'Why?' Zoso said his life had become a burden. When I asked, 'Why me?' he said his final words..." Mr. Gold knotted his hands together in his lap "...'I know how to recognize a desperate soul.'"

---

*The Dark One must really be going at it.* Smee shook his head in admiration as he stared through the jacked truck's windscreen at the dimly-lit, second-floor window above the library. According to the dashboard clock, that sly old blackguard of wealth and taste had gained entrance to Miss Belle's boudoir nearly an hour ago.

*Of course, if I had a beauty like that bouncing up and down on the mattress under me, I'd be inspired, too.*

Smee grunted. It had been donkey's ears since he'd snagged a hard-to-find object that could buy that good of a time. When next he saw Miss Belle, she'd likely be sporting a particularly fine strand of pearls, or Smee didn't know a classy beauty when he saw one.

Then, out the corner of his eye, Smee caught sight of the infernal biscuit tin. He flinched. *When next I see Miss Belle, I'll be gagging her with chloroform and hauling her to Neverland.* The unpleasantness of that inevitability made him tug his bottle of Cisco Red out of his pea jacket and take a swig.

*Why me?* Smee moaned to himself. *Why did that bilge-talking, rust-bucket, albatross of a box pick me?*
After Rumple finished his tale, Belle saw the tension drain from his face, leaving behind weary resignation. For the first time, she truly grasped the fact *He's three hundred years old*. And clearly, he'd spent a good many of those years brooding over the incidents he'd just told her.

"There you have it," he said at last. "Out of all the *talents* allotted to the Dark One, that's the most daunting—awareness of the desperation in other people's souls."

When Rumple sighed, Belle laid her hand over his. This time he didn't pull away. "I don't think that's the only reason Zoso chose you—that you were desperate enough to kill him and end his curse. I'm sure he knew a dozen in the Duke's court who would eagerly have grabbed his power if he'd told them how to do it."

Her beloved shook his head. *Oh, Rumple. Don't you see?* Belle leaned closer. "Zoso picked you because you were kind to him. Despite your dire straits, you stopped to give him money. When he asked, you unquestioningly took him in."

Rumple chuckled but the sound was hollow. "A strong argument against charity, wouldn't you say?"

Belle squeezed his hand. "Oh, you may have wanted power to beat the bullies, but only because you wanted to protect your son. That was your desperate desire—not power for domination. I think Zoso counted on it. When he decided to end his existence, he had one last moment of conscience—to spare the Enchanted Forest the havoc someone like Cora or Regina would wreak with the Dark One's magic."

For a moment, Rumple's somber brown eyes held hers. Then they hooded over. Belle bit her lip. *Why won't you believe me?* "Think about it. Zoso probably tested everybody he encountered, searching for the person best able to handle his burden. He chose you as the one least likely to cause harm."

Neal remained crouched on a wide branch high up in the Lost Boys' lookout tree, Emma's arm still slung companionably around his shoulders. For the moment, all he could do was huddle against her with his arms folded across his chest. "Wow," he said finally. "This—Mr. Gold—he sounds like quite the wheeler-dealer."

"You have no idea."

Neal scowled. He recalled Papa as a gentle man who'd taught the neighbor kids their letters and numbers, all the while working long hours at his wheel. When Reul Gorm had shown him Papa spinning in Storybrooke, those were the memories that had come flooding back.

*I should have remembered the Dark One spinning gold while he schemed.*

"And now that he has magic again," Emma added, "no telling what he's doing to Storybrooke."

*If only that hobo had never told Papa how to get it.* Of course, that first day—once Neal had gotten past the shock of watching his father slay five men in under sixty seconds—he'd felt relief at dodging a future as ogre lunch meat. When Papa had left to stop the war, he'd been proud. What son wouldn't be? After he'd returned with the neighbor kids, their parents—so used to calling Rumplestiltskin a coward—had cheered. Neal had been ecstatic.

What he came to regret was not Papa's new self-confidence. Nor the tricks. To fly through the air, to
pull fountains from the earth, to make trees bloom—how could Neal begrudge Papa the joy those wonders had brought him? What had finally estranged him was Papa's insistence that Now I understand people, what they really want—deep inside. And trust me, Bae, it isn't pretty. It was that disagreeable point-of-view that had turned his kindhearted Papa into a conniving monster.

Emma lay her head on Neal's shoulder. "I'm just glad Henry said Regina's behaving herself. She's the one I was most worried about. Mary-Margaret says here in the Enchanted Forest, she once had an entire village slaughtered just for dissing her. Not Gold's style. When I threatened to punch him in the nose the day the curse broke, all he did was laugh."

Oh, lord. Not that insane giggle. While Neal was growing up, Papa had habitually worn a faint smile but rarely anything more demonstrative than that. After he became the Dark One, he'd found the most horrible things hilarious.

"Gold is more... crafty." Emma shifted her position, making their tree-branch perch creak. "Even when he's puttering around his little shop, you get the feeling he's working his own master plan. And before you know it, he's finagled you into helping him."

Chapter End Notes

Argsch! I hope this wasn't too confusing. The anecdotes jumped straight to the end and missed several juicy points in between. Sorry I was so careless.
Tell Me Honestly

Chapter Summary

Eeks! The chapters were posted out of order. If you've already ready this chapter, you may need to go back and ready the newly posted previous chapter.

The confessions continue—in increasingly divergent directions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Evil Queen (Regina Mills):** Evil Queen: Then, what you saw, what I told you – you must keep it a secret. Can you do that? (*The Stable Boy*)

As Mr. Gold gazed into Belle's fervent blue eyes, he felt his anxieties melting. *True love—the most unfathomable magic in all the universes. No matter what horror I bring to her, she's on my side.* Gently, he entwined her fingers with his. "Sweetheart. You always look for the best in things. And when it doesn't exist... you create it."

"Oh, Rumple." The frown dimple he cherished appeared in Belle's forehead. "I'm *not* making things up. You *did* put Zoso's powers to a noble use. You stopped the Frontlands Massacres."

*Indeed. And that first day, my killing Captain Hordor, his four lackeys, the ogre chieftain, Duke Argus, and six of his lords bothered no one.* Mr. Gold flourished his free hand. "The end of the massacres was a happy occasion for the Frontlands, granted, but far from a happy ending—at least for me. When the celebrations were over and everyone returned to their usual lives, I couldn't. I'd changed too much. For a while, I continued to spin and weave, fulfilling deals I'd made before I became the Dark One, but I began bartering bits of magic as well. To my face, my petitioners were impressed and grateful. But with my newfound powers, I could sense what they *really* felt. More often than not, it was jealousy, resentment, and fear."

Belle winced. "Poor Rumple. That must have been disheartening."

Mr. Gold shrugged. "At the time, my growing awareness of my neighbors' dark sides seemed—how should I put this? Enlightening. At first, I kept my insights to myself—until one day, the tanner's wife came asking for an elixir to cure her mother-in-law's fever. Without hesitation, I replied, 'But what you *really* want, dearie, is to inherit her gold necklace.' *And my cackling at Edwina's indignation made the village quake.*"

Belle bit her lip. "Selfish impulses—we all have them. We all have to fight them."

"And the Dark One's mission is to make people give in."

Belle clicked her tongue.

*My darling.* Mr. Gold smiled. *Your refusal to concede the truth is so endearing.* "Earlier this evening, you said you'd read about me in this world's 'Rumpelstiltskin' and 'Beauty and the Beast.' I told you I figure in 'Peter Pan' and 'Cinderella' as well."
Tentatively, Belle nodded.

"Well, there's another character that describes what I became more closely than Hook's crocodile, Ella's conjurer, or your cursed beast—even more than the gold-spinning hobgoblin that carries my name." Mr. Gold took a deep breath. "The devil."

Where's that ditsy Tinker Bell? Tamping down her frustration, Emma edged closer to Neal. They'd reached that maddening point in their wait where enough time for an exhilarating quickie had come and gone, but yielding to temptation now would likely catch them with their pants down. And if not tonight, when? Once they rejoined their companions, privacy would be impossible.

Neal slid his hand under Emma's leather jacket, prompting her to arch her back like a cat. "Tell me why you wanted to punch this Gold fellow. It'll take our mind off—"

"Sure. I was kind of saving the best for last." Though Emma doubted even the tale that justified her title Savior could take her mind off the sizzle in the pit of her stomach. "It starts with Regina deciding to get rid of me, once and for all, with a dose of sleeping curse potion—from the same batch Maleficent used on Aurora and Regina used on my mother. To retrieve it, she gets a nutcase named Jefferson to reach through his magic top hat all the way to the Enchanted Forest—don't ask me how—and grab half an apple she'd marinated with the stuff. Then she plays Susie Homemaker and bakes me a turnover."

"Wow. With all that, I'd think you'd have punched Regina."

Emma paused. "I did, but that comes later."

"That's my girl." Neal gave her a squeeze.

"Well, now you're going to learn how great your son is. Just when I'm about to take a bite, Henry grabs the turnover and takes a bite himself. That means he was smart enough to guess Regina's plot, brave enough to risk the sleeping curse, and committed enough to trust I'd fix it."

"That's my boy." Neal released a contented sigh.

"For nearly a year, Henry had been trying to get cynical old me to believe in fairy tales. When he crashed to the floor in a coma, well, I entertained the possibility."

"And that's when you punched Regina."

"Yup." Emma laughed. "Afterwards, she convinces me she wants to cure Henry as much as I do but confesses she hasn't a clue how to lift her own curse. When she says there's one person in Storybrooke who might, well, I immediately guess—"

"Gold."

"Right. And wouldn't you know it? He's waiting for us. But instead of eye-of-newt, bat-wings, or whatever creepy things he's squirreled away in his shop, his cure is one I'd never expect: True love."

"As simple as that."

"Hardly." Brushing a wisp of hair out of her eyes, Emma grinned. Now for the badass part. "Gold proceeds to tell me he's bottled it—concocted from strands of my mom's and dad's hair. And because I'm the product of that true love, I'm the one who has to fetch it. But here comes the tricky part: he hid the bottle inside a dragon. To get it back, he presents me with my dad's sword."
Beside her, Neal stiffened. "He expected you to fight a dragon? Why that son-of-a-bitch."

Emma frowned. She didn't know whether to be pleased Neal felt so protective or offended he questioned her badassery. "Long story short, I fought the dragon. Got the bottle of true love, too."

Neal gasped and hugged her tighter.

"He really loves me." Emma's mouth relaxed into a smile. "Now for why Gold deserves to be punched... As I'm hauling myself back up the elevator shaft from the dragon's lair—don't ask—Gold appears at the top. With a string of bald-faced lies, he convinces me to toss him the box with the bottle. When I climb out, he's gone—with the potion."

"What?!"

"Now Neal sounds like he wants to punch Gold." Well, I'm devastated. I go to the hospital, prepared to keep a death watch. But I remember my parents' story that Henry kept pushing on me all year—that Prince Charming's true love kiss woke Snow White. I'm so desperate, I give it a go, and—"

"It worked."

"Like a charm." Emma snuggled against Neal. "Not only does Henry wake up, but everyone in Storybrooke wakes up from their fog and remembers who they are. Tada! I'm the savior." So-to-speak.

Neal growled. "No thanks to Gold."

"That's not how he looks at it." In fact, the jerk claims he deserves a thank you! "When I give Gold a piece of my mind, he counters that if he'd told me upfront true love's kiss is the only way to break a sleeping curse, I'd've called him crazy—that he knew it would take fighting a dragon to make me believe I had magic. And that only motherly desperation to save my child could make that magic powerful enough to break Henry's curse and Storybrooke's curse." Emma released a skeptical snort. She might believe in magic now, but that didn't mean she was gullible enough to buy Gold's self-serving excuses. "Desperation to save a child. What would Gold know about that?"

"Yeah," Neal mumbled. "What would Gold know."

"All I know is, Gold manipulated me." And was damn smug about it as well. "He got what he wanted—true love in a bottle. Dumping it down the town wishing well is how he got his magic back." Personally, I prefer the old-fashioned kind—a kiss.

But when Emma wriggled to find a more practical position for making out, Neal withdrew his arm and folded it across his chest. Bereft, Emma pressed her thighs together. If that airhead Tink didn't show up soon, the moment just might pass Neal and her by.

Pinocchio was grateful his father was such a skillful woodcarver. Whether it was the square manly jaw or the friendly round cheeks he'd given his son that had enticed Ruby up to his eagle's nest bedroom—or whether she'd really come to view the tableaux of Prince Charming slaying the dragon as she'd claimed—either way, he had to hand it to dear old Dad.

Now he was standing behind Ruby, admiring the fit of her vanilla white chinos as she swiveled around, admiring the oak panels that told the tale.

"Dad created it for the royal nursery—before Snow White and Charming visited Rumplestiltskin and learned the baby they were expecting would be a girl. Then they changed the theme to unicorns."
Ruby shrugged. "Even an outlaw like Snow had to go girly for a daughter." Placing her hands on her hips, she turned to the last pair of carvings in the story.

Right above my bed, Pinocchio thought with anticipation. When Ruby started laughing, he grinned. Dad had done a pretty good job on the feckless knights, scampering off in all directions while Charming stood tall.

"This isn't how the story's usually told," Ruby said. "By the time David faced the dragon, the knights were all burned to a crisp, but I guess that would've been a bit grim for a baby's room."

"Artistic license." At least Dad had faithfully captured the moment just before the next too-gross-for-a-baby event. The dragon had chased Charming into a ravine—as he'd intended—and snagged his head between two boulders, exposing his neck to the prince's raised sword. Taking a step nearer, Pinocchio nonchalantly placed a hand on Ruby's shoulder. "I always liked the idea it wasn't his brief knight's training that saved the day; it was his experience as a shepherd tricking sheep back into the pen." Hard to believe my childhood hero was that same stuffy fellow who interviewed me at the police station.

With satisfaction, Pinocchio noted that Ruby seemed relaxed despite his hand on her shoulder. As he was weighing his next move, she turned her head and favored him with a deliciously luscious smile. "Yes, I remember how you loved the twist. Such a cute little kid. If I ever skimped on the details to that scene, you'd call me out on it."

Pinocchio's jaw dropped. Then he dropped his hand to his side. "Oh, you've got to be joking. The storyteller was you? I just remember a grownup who was great at making dragon noises." Not a hot young woman whose pants I'd love to breach.

Ruby's smirk was as broad as the Cheshire Cat's. "You should see the look on your face. It can't be a surprise I was this age—physically, at least—when you were a little boy."

"I know, I know." Pinocchio's eyebrows pulled together, partially in apology, partially in chagrin. "It's just that... it hadn't occurred to me we'd actually met when I was a little boy." But I should have realized. Because of Jiminy's position as counselor, his dad had also hung out with the royal circle. Of course, Snow White's best friend Red would have, too. Back in the day, he'd been too busy making up stories with his wooden action figures to pay attention to all the big people milling around the throne room.

Still grinning, Ruby patted Pinocchio's shoulder. She's really enjoying this, isn't she? Awkwardly, he clasped his hands behind his back.

"I love Dance Central," Ruby said. "Isn't that 'I Will Survive' that's playing now?"

"Uh, yeah, probably." With the game console three stories down in his dad's den, Pinocchio couldn't be sure, but he trusted Ruby's exceptional hearing. Funny how her being a wolf woman didn't bother him half so much as learning she'd seen him in knee britches. But when she began sauntering back across his room to the steps, her wild chestnut hair swinging behind her, he mentally kicked himself. What do I care she's twenty years older? Hell, I came into existence already age six.

Just as new come-on lines began flooding his brain—Glad I caught up with you, so you're a cougar as well as a wolf, You can sit on my lap while I tell you a story anytime—Ruby started down the staircase and out of sight. With a regretful glance at his empty bed, Pinocchio followed.
This is a very long night (and Belle and Gold haven't even gone to Pinocchio's party yet).
Chapter Summary

What confessions lead to late at night...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Rumplestiltskin (Mr. Gold):** You see, when you take a heart, it becomes enchanted. Stronger than a normal heart. (*The Doctor*)

Archie stole a glance at Vincent. Now that he’d come to his guilty secret, his mind began shouting out reasons to stop talking. His friend took his hand, assuring him without words that he was safe.

Archie coughed. “S-someone offered me help—s-someone tricky. And d-d-dangerous.” *Rumplestiltskin*. “He offered me something to—to make sure my parents couldn’t—couldn’t come after me.” *A potion*. “I knew better, but I accepted.” *Without asking what the potion would do—I was that desperate to be free.*

“Kind of a deal with the devil,” Vincent said.

“Yes.” Archie swallowed. “But my father—he could always see through me. He—he switched things.” *Tricked a peasant couple into buying a fairy potion then substituted Rumplestiltskin’s*. “And a young boy's parents ended up… ended up…”

Vincent clasped his hand. His grip was reassuring. “This help... it was to get your parents convicted and locked up, so they couldn’t get to you? But they twisted the evidence, so that an innocent couple was convicted and locked up instead?”

Archie nodded. *Locked up—that's an accurate description of Geppetto's mother and father turned into marionettes, their wooden faces carved in horror.* “I saw no way to fix things. so I—I hid.” *Let the Blue Fairy make me a cricket.* “But I stayed close to the boy. I couldn't—couldn't actually raise him.” *A one-inch bug is useless at cooking supper.* “Instead, I was a mentor to him—a friend.” *And a conscience.* “When Marco made—uh—adopted a boy, I—I mentored him, too.” *Until Geppetto had to send Pinocchio away.*

“What I'm hearing,” Vincent said softly, “is you put your life on hold while you struggled to make things right.”

“I'm—I'm still struggling.” *But now I'm not the only one trying to make amends.* Just that morning, Mr. Gold had informed him, *I've replicated the original potion and transformed some beetles into wood. Once I succeed in transforming them back, we'll see.* “There’s a chance that Marco’s parents might—might finally be free. They're going to need… counseling.”

“That won't be easy,” Vincent said.

“No, it won't.” *Not when they learn their son is old enough to be their grandfather.* Archie sighed.

“Your goal is to open them to the idea a joyous, courageous, rewarding life is still possible.”
“That's a tall order.” But inspiring. Archie lifted his chin.

“You know what's more effective than 'Do as I say,' don't you? Talking from experience and leading by example.”

Archie could hear the smile behind the wise words. When Vincent's fingers touched his cheek, he slowly turned his head. His friend's eyes were as boundless as the sky.

“You're the most caring man I've ever known, Archibald Hopper. I've been searching my whole life for someone like you.”

Archie felt himself warming with emotions he'd locked up for nearly a century. He couldn't begin to comprehend the magic it had taken for Vincent to find him, but he had a good idea about its source. Mr. Gold had told him that true love is the most powerful magic in all the universes. And when that magic was augmented by acts of bravery and sacrifice—like the potion he'd instilled into Storybrooke—well, evidently it was powerful enough to bring a humble former cricket the one man best suited to be his dearest friend.

Ah, Vincent! Looping both arms around the someone he'd been missing his entire life, Archie pulled him closer.

---

Devil. How can you say such a thing? Belle stared at Rumple, hoping to see crinkles around his eyes, a quirk at the side of his mouth—something to show he was teasing. Nothing. Vigorously, she shook her head.

“Sweetheart.” Gently, he disentangled their fingers. “You told me to let you in. Now that I have, don't ask me to lie.”

Oh, Rumple. “I'm not. Don't you see?” Belle gazed at him, her heart heavy with hurt and longing. “'Devil' is a lie you're telling yourself.”

He glanced away, yet again evading her attempts at encouragement. “You say Zoso chose me because I was charitable to him. You're right. Nothing is so gratifying to a Dark One as detecting the speck of rot in an otherwise unassuming soul and helping it spread.” He jiggled his head. “I know because… I've been drawn to such endeavors enough times myself.”

And you feel guilty about it. Would the devil? Belle clasped her hands in her lap, praying for the right words to say. “I've seen you spread good with your deals—the ogre truces are the biggest example. And what about finding lost children, or reattaching severed arms, or helping crops grow?”

“For a price, dear. Always for a price.” Rumple gave a breathy laugh. “Though in truth, the service rendered was often costlier than anything paid to me—children returned to abusive parents, arms restored so soldiers could resume battle, an overabundance of wheat destroying that year's commodities market.”

Belle made a little moan of protest. “You accused me of only looking for the best in things. Well, you're looking for the worst. You can't tell me there was anything bad about wanting the power to protect Baelfire.”

Belle saw Rumple wince. “There once was a cart man who had the misfortune to bump into the Dark One's son…” He leaned back against the chair as if distancing himself from the memory. “Let's just say… Bae would disagree with you. I grew overprotective, and that was very bad indeed. When
I became aware of my neighbors' questionable intentions, I wouldn't let anyone near him except other children—and soon their parents were too frightened of me to let their children near him. Bae hated what I'd become. His desperate desire was for his papa to be ordinary again.”

As Rumple's thoughts strayed to his son, Belle saw his expression change. Rumple the observer, the scholar, the analyst who crafted clever solutions and carried them out with panache—she loved that man. He'd challenged her assumptions, exercised her logic, given her a life of higher expectations than she ever could have hoped for with her father's choice of husband, that conceited lout, Gaston.

But there was another Rumple, one who loved so deeply that he revered a chipped cup, that nostalgia for a lost son made his face haggard—the feelings she cherished for the man sitting with her now were so profound she knew no word for them.

When the skin between Rumple's eyebrows bunched together, Belle placed her hands on his shin. Though her touch was light, he flinched. “That's why you won't heal your leg, isn't it? This injury is your pledge that you would do anything for your son.”

Rumple's eyes widened, and his lips parted. Clearly, her observation had taken him by surprise. As he nodded, his jaw began to quiver. “In my endlessly long life, I've never broken a deal… save one. Bae wanted me to give up my powers. I said it couldn't be done. He asked, if he could find a way, would I take it? I agreed. Easy to make a deal one believes will never have to be honored.” He blew out his breath. “But my boy—he's smart. He called on a different power, the original power—Reul Gorm. She told him about a land without magic—this land—and gave him one of the last of the giant's beans to open a portal.”

“That's why you hate her.” Carefully, Belle began massaging Rumple's leg.

Rumple pressed his palm against his forehead. “When Bae threw her bean on the ground, he created a maelstrom. Without hesitation, he took my hand and jumped. He's that brave. I wasn't.” He doubled up, as if in pain, yet he kept talking, telling her in a rush the secret he'd held back for years. “My other hand held the dagger. I jabbed it into the dirt at the lip of the portal. Already, I could feel my powers fading, regressing me into that weakling who couldn't fight Jones to claim his wife, who had to kiss Hordor's boot to save his son.” He shuddered. “Bae never doubted me—not until he saw me clutch the dagger. He screamed at me that we had a deal. I—I let go of his hand.”

Belle gasped.

Rumple's face crumpled. “Just for an instant. I meant to get a better handhold to drag us out. When I turned back, Bae was falling. A second later, the portal was… gone.” He jammed his knuckles into his eyes. “That was the speck of rot Zoso saw in me: hunger for power. And after I killed for that power, the rot spread into an all-consuming fear of losing it. And out of that fear, I…” His words deteriorated into a groan. He jerked his head as if forcing himself to continue. “I let my child down. That was me, not the curse. At the portal's threshold I was free of it, free to choose…”

Belle sat frozen on the edge of the hassock, oppressed by her vivid imagination. She could see the treacherous whirlpool, Rumple's vehement refusal to return to a wretched life, Bae's equally vehement desire to see his father himself again. The betrayal the son had suffered, the regrets the father had suffered ever since—they made her body ache.

A moment later, Belle sprang up from her seat and bent over Rumple as far as she could without losing her balance. She encircled him with her arms, gathering him up as if he were the lost child. He melted inside her embrace, for once not resisting her comfort.

Belle put her lips to Rumple's ear. “When you let go of his hand, you chose wrongly, but you've
paid. It took you a terribly long time, but finally you've fulfilled your bargain. You're here. When you find Bae—like the seer prophesied you will—he'll understand.”

Rumple's arms came around Belle, pulling her off her feet, clinging to her. “I abandoned you for the same reason. Instead of love, I saw a threat to my power. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“I forgive you, my love, my own true love. In more ways than I can count.”

Rumple drew Belle onto the chair. They twisted and adjusted until she was comfortably nestled on his lap. She could feel his pulse calming. “And Bae…” he whispered. “After all this time, will he accept my pledge? Will he…?”

You want to know whether the devil can be redeemed. “Of course,” Belle murmured. “He's a dear, sweet boy who loves his papa. Of course, he'll forgive you.”

Dropping his head, Rumple nuzzled the spot where her heart beat in her neck, infusing her with magic only he could wield.

I'll never forgive him, Neal said to himself as he cradled Emma against his chest. How could that bastard have risked this wonderful woman against a dragon? And their boy to the outcome? Neal had blamed the curse for Papa's dwindling concern for other people. Now that he was a man again, weren't his actions evidence that his truest self was an asshole?

A gust of wind rustled the tree. Neal shivered, recalling that dreadful winter afternoon when the Dark One had made two momentous discoveries: first, that he could transform humans into creatures; second, that once the life spark had been thoroughly squished, there was no changing a snail back into a man. Knowing the trigger for the atrocious act had been a scrape on Neal's leg had laid a huge weight of guilt on his young self. That evening, when Papa had asked, Are you really that unhappy, Bae? I can conjure anything you desire. Name it. What do you want? Neal had answered, I want my father.

He clenched his jaw. But did I really lose Papa to the curse? Or did it just give him the courage to stop hiding what he truly was? Maybe it let me really know him for the first time.

In the last hour, the moon had dipped below the tree line, leaving the stars as cold, hard crystals in a black sky. Once the Storybrooke curse had exposed the rift between Neverland and the realm of his birth, Neal had flown that sky often, worrying about his papa, cursing his teenage recklessness for their separation. What a chump. He'd really believed Reul Gorm's vortex had taken that man by surprise? A master of icy calculation like him? Wasn't it more likely the Dark One had planned to dump his bothersome son all along?

Emma roused in his arms. “Do you hear that?”

Tenderly, Neal smoothed his hand down her long, tangled hair. “Hear what?”

“Nothing. I've lost track of when I last heard a zombie howl.”

You're right. In the distance, a heron squawked. Beyond that, silence.

“To hell with waiting for Tink,” Neal muttered. He slid his hand up Emma's back, wondering whether he'd find two clasps or three.
Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?
Chapter Summary

Four couples. Four problems.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Cora (The Queen of Hearts):** You can tell me. You must tell me. *(The Stable Boy)*

Mr. Gold lay in the middle of Belle's big brass bed, listening to her breathe, feeling like he'd been created anew. Even his bad leg, propped up by her gentle hands on a feather pillow, no longer ached. Letting her into the dark corners of his life had been as revitalizing as letting her into his castle had been. Once more, she'd flung back the musty curtains and brought in the sun.

*I can be a better man—for Belle.* Of course, it wouldn't be easy. Despite what he'd hoped, Mr. Gold suspected that Charming was right. His weathering the car attack unscathed proved that coming to Storybrooke hadn't broken the Dark One curse. But if he could keep its influence to a manageable level, he could remain its master. If he coolly calculated each action, resisted the compulsion to fulfill dark whims—his own and others'—he could maintain a course Belle would approve.

*Just one crushed snail incident, and I'll lose her again.*

And amends—he needed to make amends, limited, thank goodness, to anyone with a complaint who, A, was still alive and, B, had been brought to Storybrooke. He'd already dealt with the shoemaker couple, and he was working on Geppetto's parents. Fellow citizens who held grudges regarding relatives now departed—like the butcher's father—would be harder to mollify, but he would do his best. To keep track, he'd start a spreadsheet.

Belle stirred. Mr. Gold's pulse quickened. Turning his head, he watched her languorously stretch her spine, loll her head back with a sigh, flutter her lashes, then sleepily open her eyes. When she caught sight of him, she came wide awake with a delighted *hmmm*. She propped herself on one elbow and smiled down at him. "I floated from here to dreamland and back again. I don't know which of your talents flies me higher—your mouth, your fingers, your hips..."

*You're the creative one. I merely ply my craft.* Mr. Gold ran his eyes over Belle's beautiful face. "Sweetheart, I can't be what you were expecting when you first kissed your beast. You were robbed of the young, agile, handsome prince you deserved."

"Hmph. Phooey on that," Belle laughed. "I wanted you, remember? Even though I'd never before seen you free of the Dark One curse, when Storybrooke came alive, I recognized you immediately—recognized you as the man I love."

*Free of the curse? Well, nearly.* Gazing into Belle's affectionate blue eyes, Mr. Gold nodded. "Rumplestiltskin, wait." He'd never forget the thrill of hearing those words.

Belle cocked her head. "Those first few weeks here, I wasn't what you deserved. I was edgy, suspicious, jumpy—making demands, issuing ultimatums at every turn."
"After the trauma you'd been through? Because of me? That was nothing." Mr. Gold caressed Belle's cheek. "I can't help but think how much happier your life would have been if I'd never come into it at all."

"Mm." Belle pursed her lips. "Just because I was a privileged, sheltered, rich girl, you think there was nothing I wanted?"

Mr. Gold shrugged. "Well, I know you wanted to see the world, be a hero."

"You remember." Belle gave him her rosebud smile. "But I never told you my desperate desire. It was to not marry Gaston."

"Ahh." Mr. Gold recalled Belle's words as she perched on the edge of his grand banquet table—the words that had first given him hope. *It was an arranged marriage. Honestly, I never really cared for Gaston. To me, love is layered. Love is a mystery to be uncovered. I could never truly give my heart to someone as superficial as he.*

"When you appeared, the renowned ogre negotiator, offering me work, a chance to be something more than an ornament and—best of all—a chance to escape my wedding day with Gaston, I had to take it."

"Sweetheart." *I was too busy handling my own longing for you to realize you'd been calling out to me.*

With a sigh, Belle lowered her head to Mr. Gold's chest, resting it atop his beating heart. "Ruby told me your story of seeing me in the marketplace in Avonlea. Love at first sight, so romantic."

*Bless you, Ruby.*

"What you don't know is that all the while you were watching me telling Gaston off for whipping that poor woman, I was desperately wishing he would change—stop being so arrogant, stop being a bully, become something different... something sweeter."

*No.* Mr. Gold cleared his throat. "Sweeter?"

"A foolish notion, I know. Changing someone like Gaston was probably beyond even your powers."

Mr. Gold grimaced. He was glad Belle was facing the other way.

"I wonder whatever happened to Gaston. Father tells me he's never come across him in Storybrooke."

Mr. Gold cuddled Belle against his chest, knowing he had a secret he would keep from her forever—that without being conscious of it himself, he had sensed her most desperate heart's desire, that he'd indeed cast the magic she most dearly wanted, that when Gaston had stormed up to the Dark Castle, zealous to slay the beast, Rumplestiltskin had impulsively turned him into something sweeter: a rose. At the time, it had seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

Though blameless, Belle would feel guilty about her part in what happened next. She'd accepted the rose with a curtsy, clipped Gaston's stem, and placed him in a sparkling crystal vase where they'd both admired him for a week. And when the sweetest version of Gaston that ever existed had wilted, Belle had taken him from the vase and added him to the garden mulch.

Belle released a dreamy *mmm*, and Mr. Gold stroked her luxuriant copper hair. *Whatever happened to Gaston* was a secret she need not ever know.
"Tell me, Rumple," Belle murmured, "how did you come to be Captain Hook's crocodile?"

Crouched in a corner of the cave, Snow White smiled at the sleeping boys, cuddled together in the flickering torchlight like a litter of puppies... at Tootles propped up by his juniper staff, keeping watch while Nibs caught a moment of shut-eye at his feet... at Aurora and Mulan sleeping side-by-side, the soldier's arm draped protectively over the princess... at Inigo glancing at them curiously and pacing.

Charming's mantra stirred in Snow's mind, comforting her: *I'll find you. I will always find you.* When he did, they'd make short work of Hook and Cora, reunite the Lost Boys with the lost Lost Boys and Inigo with his brothers. Happy endings for everybody!

As her musings took flight, Snow closed her eyes—just for a moment. When she and Charming retook their castle, they'd have room for all the Lost Boys... Charming would teach them the broadsword and baseball... They'd force Rumplestiltskin to retrieve the soul of Aurora's poor husband, Prince Phillip. If he didn't, back to the dungeon! ...Inigo would be so grateful at getting his brothers back, he'd join their circle of friends and protectors. They'd urge him to pop the question to Mulan. It was obvious he was dying to... Surely, Mulan was hoping for it as well... And she and Aurora could be bridesmaids at Emma and Neal's wedding... And then would come the grandchildren...

Problems solved, Snow stretched out. Drifting, she felt her husband's hand stroke her back and his breath warm her cheek.

As Archie basked in the glow of contentment that lit up Vincent's handsome face, he blessed the Storybrooke curse. Not only had it implanted the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Magna Cum Laude plus internship that gave him the skills to be a counselor, it had embedded a detailed set of memories of how to be a lover as well. Surveying the brown plaid flannel tangled around their ankles, he realized that for once, he'd really need to change the guest bedroom sheets.

*And it's not even eleven o'clock.*

Vincent took Archie's hand and held it to his perspiration-slick chest. "Did you know sex lowers heart attack risk? I think you and I are going to have very long lives."

Archie nodded. *You have no idea.* In the dimension Vincent hailed from, lives always ran in parallel. Two people born the same year both reached manhood in the same year. If not for the time-bending possibilities of Archie's dimension—if not for his sixty years penance as a magically indestructible cricket plus his twenty-nine years of dismal repetition under Regina's universe-ripping curse—he and Vincent would never have met at all.

"Arch." Vincent fondled his hand. "Do you believe in true love?"

Archie gulped. He wondered whether Vincent could feel the surge in his pulse. "Why—why are you asking?"

Vincent shrugged. "That's the topic of the lecture I'm giving tomorrow at the UMaine Folklife Center: 'The Myth of True Love in Western Fairy Tales.'"

*Myth?* Archie smiled. To a native of the Enchanted Forest, doubting the reality of true love would display an ignorance as bad as an earth denizen doubting their world was round.

"I've given the same talk a couple of times before. I'm considering turning it into a monograph, but I
think I'm missing perspective on it. If you come out with me to Orono tomorrow, you could give me a critique."

*Leave Storybrooke?* Archie chewed his lip. *Not until Mr. Gold figures out how to preserve memories past the town line. "I—I can't..."

Vincent's smile drooped. "Oh, Arch. I was hoping we could spend the rest of the day together before I catch my plane."

Archie sucked in his breath. "So soon?"

"Classes on Monday. I don't know how long it'll be before I find my way up here again."

The words struck Archie like a foot kicking a sand castle. He had the sick feeling that if Vincent left, he might never find his way back to Storybrooke.

Charming reached over and stroked Snow's back, reveling in the warm smooth skin covering his wife's slim, strong, warrior's body. He sought out the soft spot just below her rib cage that made her giggle. He arched his neck to blow softly on her cheek.

*I'm still half-asleep.* And for what he wanted to do, wide awake was best.

He stretched until his neck creaked and blinked until his eyes were fully open.

"Snow."

No answer.

Alarmed, he ripped back the covers to the stark reality of Snow's pillow lying next to him without a raven-haired beauty snuggled into it.

Groaning, Charming wriggled out of the sheets and swung his feet to the floor. First thing in the morning, he'd take his newly collected hair samples to Mr. Gold. He wouldn't leave until that damned wizard opened a portal he could charge through to retrieve Snow.

How could he stand the weary hours until then? Might as well sit for another lesson in how to be a proper law enforcement officer.

Charming turned on the light to hunt for the remote. Time for another episode of Miss Marple on Netflix.

In their vagabond days, Emma and Neal had become virtuosos of inconvenient sex. Making love in the backseat of their jacked VW bug had been their forte, but they'd also mastered gas station bathrooms, bus stop shelters, and golf course sand traps late, late at night. In comparison, a vine-woven hammock at the top of a tree was a luxury.

Panting and giggling, Emma huddled with Neal in the still swaying hammock, helping him with his zipper while he helped refasten her bra. Having their way with each other fully clothed had been another specialty—except this time the light that had warned them to forego an encore was not a police car's headlamp, it had been Tinker Bell's green twinkle.

*When Neal and I finally get naked in a clean bed, we'll have to figure out what's what all over again.*

By the time the sparkle was close enough for Emma to make out the itsy-bitsy young lady and her
lacy wings, she and Neal were lounging back as if they'd been doing nothing at all. At Tink's first clink, however, Neal sat bolt upright and held out his hands. As soon as the fairy was sheltered in them, she started jangling.

Chapter End Notes

The ships are strong, but the seas are about to get stormy again. The journey isn't yet done.
What You're Looking For

Chapter Summary

Some secrets can't be shared.
Some zombies can't be faced.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Belle to the Dark One (Rumplestiltskin/Mr. Gold): I think you're not as dark as you want people to think. (Lacey)

Mr. Gold closed the door to Belle's bathroom behind him. Then he turned on the shower. Under cover of the whooshing water, he banged his head against the mirror.

Fool, fool, fool. Why had he claimed a role in Peter Pan's story as Hook's crocodile? Why had he sent Belle's inquisitive mind down that path—so you're the one who took his hand... so you're the reason he's known as Hook... so before his name was something else altogether... He'd barely made an excuse toduck out before she could voice the next logical conclusions—Hook's real name is Killian Jones... You found out what he did with your wife... That's why you cut off his hand... He killed her...

When his darling Belle reached that inevitable assumption, he'd be forced to answer with the truth: No, my dear. I did.

"Rumple," Belle called out from the bedroom, "you're taking a shower? Now?"

Gripping the edge of the pedestal sink, Mr. Gold forced himself to smile. If he didn't, she'd hear it in his voice. "Yes, Sweetheart. We need to hurry if we're going to make August's party."

"The party? Really? You're still planning on going?"

"I know it's late, but I promised." Mr. Gold stared at his reflection. "And I cannot break a promise." Even my promise to never lie to you, even if keeping that promise will tear us apart.

Reveling in the brisk night air gusting through her hair, Emma was tickled to discover that flying with the help of fairy dust was like riding a bicycle. Now that she'd gotten the hang of it, she could do it again. Even so, Neal held tight to her hand—just in case. As they soared over the grove of swamp cypresses, she squeezed his fingers. I don't mind at all.

Ahead of them, Tinker Bell's green twinkle crested the last of the trees and dipped out of view. They sailed after her then looped around the clearing. Neal hadn't been exaggerating about the fairy's fire power. Felled zombies lay everywhere. The ones he hadn't dismembered with his blade Tink had finished off by blasting their heads into ashes.

Emma grinned in relief. She scanned the area, eager to congratulate the itsy-bitsy fairy. Then she caught sight of her hovering over a patch of sand, blinking on and off like a distress beacon. Beneath her lay four little zombies. Gliding nearer, Emma could see their heads looked disturbingly whole.
What's wrong with that ditzy flutterbug? Why didn't she finish the job? Emma didn't know how long it took for an intact cadaver to reanimate, and she didn't want to find out—not when she'd left her lady sword dangling from a branch in the lookout tree.

When they drew close enough to make out the zombies' faces by the fairy's flickering glow, Neal gasped and let go of Emma's hand. He dropped through the air so fast that his landing was a stumble. Then he fell to his knees.

An instant later, Emma lit down beside him and pressed her hand on his shoulder.

"They're my mates." Neal shuddered. "Guffie, Poolie, Dawdles, and Mucker. They went missing months ago. When I got my flying back last night, I was thinking of ways to find and rescue them. I knew there was the chance they might already be dead, but... but this. I never imagined this."

Emma studied the putrefying faces, the blank soulless eyes. She bit her lip. By their sizes, none looked older than nine. When Neal hung his head, she knelt and swept her arms around him. Then she pressed her cheek against his.

"I should have been here for them," he whispered.

"It's not your fault," Emma murmured.

Neal groaned.

Emma hugged him tighter. "Hook's to blame. And Cora." With those two villains conniving again, every last one of their little band had to pull themselves together—or they'd end up as meat puppets, too.

Out the corner of her eye, Emma saw what looked like a twitch in one of the zombies' cheeks. She jerked her head around to stare. Slowly, she released her breath. *My mistake. Just fairy flicker.*

Tinker Bell jingled, and Neal nodded. Then the tiny light flared and shot up in the sky.

Emma frowned. "Where's she going?"

"To the sand pit—to give our friends the all clear."

Emma centered her gaze on the zombies, trying to make out their faces in the waning moonlight. She wondered how upset Neal would be if she found a rock and bashed their skulls in. Then she tensed. This time there was no mistaking it: the twitching cadaver was raising its head. "Quick! They're reanimating! We've got to fly out of here."

When Emma jumped to her feet, Neal struggled up after her, but when he took a hop, he came right back down. "I can't."

Emma swallowed hard. As the other three zombies began to stir, a sickening realization gripped her: *I can't either.*

---

Belle huddled on her bed, her mind roiling with Enchanted Forest memories of the magical mayhem she'd seen the Dark One wreak on those who'd crossed him—taking the Sheriff of Nottingham's tongue after he made a lewd suggestion about her, turning the Butcher of Lethe into a pig for breaking a deal, stripping the Bremen Town Mayor's wife of half her beauty when she offered him half his fee. Of course, Belle had always scolded the imp for his gleeful payback. His usual response had been a snigger. *What're you going on about? I put everything back.*
"But the captain still wears a hook," she whispered.

Belle knew because she’d seen it. When she had been chained up in the Evil Queen’s tower, that blackguard had broken in, claiming her father had sent him to rescue her but really trying to wheedle from her the secret of Rumplestiltskin’s power. After she called him out on his lie, he’d punched her in the face. The heavy rings he sported on his good hand had left a scar on her cheek that she wore to this day. Now she understood who that bully had been before he’d earned his renowned nickname—the same thug who had abducted a lame peasant’s wife then taunted him about it, the pirate Killian Jones.

_He wasn’t in the shower. He was standing before her sink. At her words, he jerked around then backed up a step. "Belle." As his eyes locked on hers, he tucked in his elbows and pulled down his chin—looking for all the world like he was bracing for an attack._

_The sight brought a pang to the pit of her stomach. "Rumple—" _

"I can’t talk about it," he blurted out. "Please—_please_ don't ask."

"I wasn't. I—"

"It was a horrible incident a long, long time ago." Rumple's forehead tensed, and his jaw trembled. "I can't undo it. I can't make amends. Those involved—they're not in Storybrooke. I'll never see any of them ever again. All I can do is try—try with all my heart to be a better man now."

Belle lifted a hand, soothing him from a distance. "Shh. No questions. What's past is past. It can't hurt us. Not tonight." She hesitated then took a step forward. "I just wanted to suggest... in the interests of getting to August's party before it's over... maybe we could shower together."

---

Through the driver's side window of the jacked truck, Smee stared at the second floor of the library. If the Dark One and Miss Belle had hunkered down for the night, no reasonable person could expect a modest procurer such as himself to burst in and grab her.

_But an unreasonable one?_ Smee tipped his bottle of Cisco Red bottoms up, praying for one last drop of oblivion to splat on his tongue.

_Empty._

Smeet tossed the bottle behind the seat and buried his face in his hands. If only he were dealing with someone besides the Terror of Neverland—someone besides Captain Hook. When the scorching light had named the drop point for the hard-to-find object, Smee’s original guess at his employer had been confirmed. How the captain had rigged a Christmas biscuit tin with the voice of Smee’s own sweet Ma to relay his orders remained a puzzle, but everything else he had been dragooned into doing since Monday made sense.

Try to kill the Dark One to test his powers: of course, the captain would want to know if he were up against someone he could bully or someone who could bully him.

Powers demonstrated, try to steal the Dark One's dagger: back in the Enchanted Forest, when the
captain had learned that secret from the Evil Queen herself, he'd let Smee in on it, too—to help kick around ideas for how to nick it. Just like the captain to finally give it a go through an agent rather than risking it himself.

Now that the dagger was out-of-reach, the captain was trying another tack. "Leverage," Smee said aloud. "That's what Miss Belle is."

He peered at the dimly lighted window. With two centuries gone by—with the hundreds of ladies, beauties, and wenches the captain had bedded since—surely his old boss couldn't be wanting to avenge himself for Milah by hurting Miss Belle... could he?

As much as he wanted to, Smee couldn't deep-six the possibility. Hadn't he been crouching on the deck of the Jolly Roger the morning that brazen she-pirate had sneered in the Dark One's face? Strictly speaking, he hadn't seen what happened next—not with his eyes screwed shut—but that evening he'd stood behind the captain when he'd sent his lady love's shrouded corpse to Davy Jones' locker.

"Pressuring the Dark One to fork over his power—that'll satisfy Hook's Code of Honor." Smee nodded. The alternative didn't bear speculation.

The library's front door opened, and Smee scrunched down in his seat. When he saw the Dark One, he hugged himself. Finally. With the wizard out of the way, he could collect his package. Hoodwinking Miss Belle would be easy. In many ways, she reminded him of his dear old gramma—the one who'd knitted him his red cap. Ma had been no-nonsense, but Grams would let him get away with anything—just like Miss Belle. Despite the fact he'd tricked her before, if he knocked on her door with a story of a flat tire, a flooded engine, or maybe a lost puppy, she'd let him in. And when she woke up from a snoot full of chloroform in Neverland, she'd forgive him again.

Smee watched the Dark One pop open a big black umbrella and smiled, but when Miss Belle stepped out under it, he groaned. What kind of night owls were these two? At this rate, he'd be tailing them until dawn. Good thing he'd stuck a tracking device on the Cadillac's undercarriage—the same gizmo Moe had ordered off the Internet after the Dark One had repossessed the Game of Thorns van.

Smee stayed parked until the couple drove off down the street. When they were out of sight, he gunned the jacked truck's engine. Recalling what he'd overheard Miss Belle tell that addled bloke Jefferson—*Revenge has a way of hitting wide of the mark*—he chuckled. If the Dark One hadn't tried to get back at Moe for who knows what, Smee wouldn't be having such a breezy time following him now.

Chapter End Notes

Actually, Hook didn't merely knock Belle out. After she was lying unconscious, he raised his hook hand to strike her with the sharp end; that's when Regina magicked his hook away from him. But Belle wasn't aware of that, so she wouldn't remember it.
What Are You Doing Here?

Chapter Summary

August cracks a joke.
Emma cracks a head.
Mr. Gold un-cracks an earth gadget.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin): If we were welcome, I feel confident an invitation would have been extended. (The Queen is Dead)

When Ruby reached August's father's den and the source of the laughter and the music, she stopped in the doorway. Her shoulders, hips, and feet wanted to join the partiers playing Dance Central, but then her thoughts strayed to Billy and she folded her arms instead. The last time she saw him, she'd begged off going dancing at the Rabbit Hole. At the time, she'd had only one hour's grace until moon-rise. Check with me this weekend, she'd told him and sent him on his way.

Ruby drew a deep breath and released it in a sigh. Now that the weekend was here, her last chance to step out with Billy was gone forever.

Observing her friends gyrating in imitation of the digital divas on Geppetto's big-screen TV, Ruby recalled trying out "Electric Circus" dance moves with Billy back in junior high. The fact she'd actually spent her childhood trying to absorb Granny's woodland secrets—and Billy had spent his piling up dirty linen with his mouse siblings, arranging toiletries on dressing tables, and hunting down lost stockings to spare Ella her stepmother's abuse—none of that mattered. Her implanted memories of him were as dear as if they'd really happened.

August ambled up next to Ruby, and she gave him a half-smile. As the next song started, she considered taking a turn in remembrance of Billy. Instead, she said, "Why don't you show me how it's done?" When the Enchanted Forest's most agreeable liar took the floor, the saucy sales clerk from the kitchen appliance store—the one with the mass of golden curls—jumped up beside him.

Ruby watched them a moment, flinging out their arms to form Y-M-C-A, smiled, and shook her head. August won't miss me. She backed out of the den and started down the hall, heading for the coat rack. Then someone called out her name.

Turning, Ruby saw Ella. Her prince-slash-cannery-worker-slash-guitar-hero husband trailed her, their one-year-old daughter Alex asleep over his shoulder.

"How you holding up?" asked the woman whose childhood memories of Billy were real.

Ruby gave Ella a hug. "Okay... until something reminds me of him. And frankly, tonight lots of things remind me of him." She sighed. "I shouldn't've come."

"That's not how Billy would've seen it." Ella patted her shoulder. "You know what he told me the night of Thomas's ball? Go have a good time for the both of us."
Her husband smiled and hitched their daughter a little higher. "You'd have loved seeing Billy play footman. By the time Ella showed up, I'd greeted so many stuck-up princesses, I was zoning out. Then this beauty opens the door of her carriage with a big grin on her face. As her man helps her down the steps, he says something that makes her squeeze his hand. As if that's not enough to make me curious, behind her back, he winks at me, points at her and mouths she's the one."

"Wow. I can picture Billy doing that." Ruby hesitated, reluctant to voice what was upsetting her most. "His death—I feel responsible. If King George hadn't wanted to frame me..."

"Nonsense," Thomas said. "How's George being a nasty piece of work your fault?"

Ella folded her arms. "Prince Charming should've told Paul Bunyan to chop his head off."

Ruby bit her lip. She had to admit, the thought was appealing. "But Mr. Gold—"

"Had to go stick his big nose in where it didn't belong."

Ruby studied Ella. Right now she was looking more like a haughty royal than the forlorn stepchild Billy's family had befriended. "I wasn't at the Town Hall meeting, but from what I heard, Mr. Gold made some good points—"

"Hah. That creep shot his mouth off with claptrap about laws and trials and fairness just to confuse everyone. Back home, heroes knew what to do with villains."

"Well," Ruby began, "David does have George behind bars—"

"If locking George up is all Charming's going to do, then at least he should throw away the key."

The princess stated her opinion so loudly, her little girl started crying. Ella made a face but didn't turn around.

Watching Alex's cheeks grow redder with each sob, Ruby wondered whether she'd be overstepping if she butted in.

Then August poked his head out of the den. "May I hold her? I'm kind of good with kids."

Thomas shook his head as he jiggled Alex up and down. "This situation calls for a different gender."

"I volunteer," Ruby said.

"Uh..." Thomas coughed. "You have the equipment... but you need a little customer of your own to get the service turned on."

"Oh." Ruby pressed her lips together, half-embarrassed, half-amused.

Ella rolled her eyes. "For goodness sakes!" She pivoted on her heel, stomped over to her husband, and grabbed her child.

"Mamamamamama!" Alex babbled happily.

Ella slung her over her shoulder and turned back to Ruby. "Somebody should tell Gold what he can do with his 'higher code.' If I weren't so busy being a mom, I'd go to his shop and do it myself."

Glancing at August, Ruby saw mischief light up his bright blue eyes. "This is your lucky night. Mr. Gold is coming here."

At August's statement, Ella squeaked. Alex began crying again.
Thomas frowned. "Hey, stop lying, why don't you? Can't you see you're upsetting my wife?"

"I'm not lying. In fact—"

As if on cue, Ruby heard a knock.

August grinned. "Belle texted me a few minutes ago that she and Mr. Gold were on their way. I bet that's them now."

With a whimper, Ella jostled past Ruby, yanked open the first door she came to, and slammed it shut behind her.

---

Emma had to tug on Neal's arm—hard—to get him moving. They needed to clear out the last four zombies before Tink returned with the rest of the crew. With the trauma the Lost Boys had already experienced, they shouldn't have to top it off with seeing their comrades going rancid. But first, she and Neal had to gain some ground.

"You can say a few words in your friends' memories later," she panted, jogging with him toward a boulder in the middle of the clearing. "Those things following us aren't them—just empty shells we need to cremate in a fire spout."

"Yes," he mumbled. "I think there's one over—" As he pointed, a pop sounded, followed by a blast of flame.

"That's my guy." Emma trotted around the boulder and peeked over the top. Neal pulled up beside her. "Nibs told me fire spouts shoot off regular—just like Old Faithful."

"Yeah. I'll time the next one."

Emma gave Neal an oblique inspection. He'd pulled himself together sufficiently to cooperate with a plan, but his voice still sounded as lifeless as his former friends. Anything that required quick thinking she'd have to do herself. Bad luck she'd left her sword hanging on the tree but great luck she'd forgotten and left the enchanted compass there as well.

A pop and the fire spout flashed again. Out loud, Neal began counting: "One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three..."

By the time one-thousand eleven identified the interval between flames, the four zombies were within a yard of the boulder. "Okay," Emma said. "When they start their three-bumps-into-a-barrier sequence, let's run to the other side of the spout."

Neal nodded, his lips moving as he started his next count.

But instead of acting like automatons, the zombies split up with one staggering around each side of the boulder and two scrabbling over the top. This time, is Cora directing them? "Neal, we gotta run." And find some big rocks.

They came to a stop on the safe side of the fire spout just as Neal said, "One-thousand six."

"Super. At least, they aren't carrying swords." Then Emma heard something that told her these zombies had weapons far worse.

"Peter!" cried a childlike voice. "Help us! We're under a curse! Help!"

Beside her, Neal murmured, "Poolie...?"
Another voice chimed in, then another until all four were crying, "Peter!" "We need you!" "Don't let us down!" "Peter!" "Not again!"

Emma clenched her fists. *Forget rocks. I'm gonna break Cora's toys with my bare hands.*

Neal took a step forward.

"No!" Emma shrieked and grabbed him. "They're zombies. Can't you smell them?"

Neal struggled. Then he broke free, sending Emma flat on her back in the sand. "They're my mates."

Emma heard a pop. Just in time, she snatched Neal's foot out from under him and tugged him down sprawling beside her. The heat of the fire spout blasted in their faces. Gasping for breath, she realized that at the warning sound, the zombies had paused. Now they were lurching safely around it. *These aren't pre-programmed monsters. Cora's running them like personal avatars.*

"Peter, you left us!" "Why, Peter, why?"

As Neal propped himself up, Emma climbed on his chest. She dedicated her full weight—all 120 pounds of her—to pinning him down. Then she began rummaging the many pockets of his ratty winter coat, desperate to find the daggers she'd used as darts earlier—the ones he'd retrieved from the zombies she'd stopped before.

When her hand closed around a handle, she whooped.

Neal's reaction was a grunt. He gripped her wrist and shook it. "Don't you dare. They're just kids."

"Snap out of it!" With her free hand, Emma slapped his face. Her other, she yanked from his grasp.

Then a different hand—a bony hand—clutched her back, and a boyish voice whispered in her ear: "Help us! Help us! Help us!"

A low wail started deep in Emma's throat, building quickly to a scream. She couldn't stop herself. Her terror was so loud she almost didn't hear another sound, a welcome sound, the sound of blessed rescue coming at last.

"Foul creature, release that woman! I am Inigo Domingo Santiago de Todos Montoya the Fourth. Prepare to die—again!"

The dead fingers dug deep into Emma's shoulder. Then they were gone. Twisting, she saw a headless zombie collapse like a marionette that had lost its strings. With a mighty swing of his sword, Inigo shattered the skull of another. As he struck a pose to deal with the third, the last of the four zombies staggered up behind him. With no time to think—even less to aim—Emma flicked the dagger.

The pointy end lodged in the eye socket. The corpse toppled. *Yes!* Emma exulted. She'd saved her savior.

Neal moaned.

When the fire spout flamed again, Emma sprang to her feet counting. By the next flare, she was determined to have piled the mortal remains of Neal's beloved mates safely on the pyre.

---

Sitting at Geppetto's kitchen table, Mr. Gold closed his eyes—the better to focus on the inner workings of Thomas's short-circuited guitar and the better to ignore the stares of the prince's loyal
supporters crowding around him. Reattaching Dr. Whale's arm had required a mere wave of his hand—
the intricacies of re-joining skin, ligaments, blood vessels, arteries, tendons, muscles, and bones
condensed through years of experience into one grand flourish. But intervening in the affairs of earth
gadgets? This was new. Why hadn't he objected when Pinocchio had boasted he could do it? If he
failed, they'd resent him. And if he succeeded, they'd resent him even more for not repairing every
broken toaster, radio, hair dryer, and vacuum in Storybrooke.

No matter. Would I expect anything different?

Concentrating, Mr. Gold stroked the back of the guitar, his perception probing deeper and deeper
until he could distinguish the orderly wires and widgets versus the trouble spot where rain had
seeped through and diverted the electricity to arc, surge, then fuse the bits and pieces of a cylindrical
something and frazzle the copper wires tangled around it.

Aha, he said to himself and opened his eyes. Here goes...

With a long, deep breath, Mr. Gold inhaled the magic of Storybrooke. Exhaling slowly, he redirected
it to flow out his fingers. As a shimmering blue light enveloped the guitar, a collective Aghhhhh!
spread through the spectators. When the magic permeating the guitar had restored its components to
their former state, he jiggled his head. "Done." I hope.

A petite woman with short brown hair—the former Little Bo Peep if he wasn't mistaken—clapped.
"Plug it in, plug it in!"

Mr. Gold surrendered the guitar and leaned back in his chair—feigning disinterest as the young
people exploded into activity around him. In less than a minute, Thomas was standing beside a large
black box, brandishing his instrument, as Pinocchio connected the two with a long black cord.
Steeling himself for failure, Mr. Gold raised his chin. Utter silence. Then the prince strummed a
blaring chord.

Done, indeed.

"Time to rock!" exclaimed a young man Mr. Gold knew was a drummer. "The rest of us are set up
in the living room. Come on."

"Told you he could fix it," Pinocchio said as he followed them out of the kitchen.

Mr. Gold's eyes strayed to Belle, and she blew him a kiss. Then Ruby grabbed her elbow and pulled
her along with the crowd.

As the partiers trooped out, Thomas hung back. "So... what's your price?"

Mr. Gold smiled. Finally. A royal who realizes it's wrong to expect something for nothing. "Don't
trouble yourself. Tonight, I was protecting my investment. You still owe me half your take from gigs
at the Rabbit Hole—at least until your pledge is paid. If your instrument had remained disabled, what
worth would that deal be to me?"

Thomas nodded. "Two Saturday nights ought to square it."

Mr. Gold shrugged.

Thomas adjusted his guitar strap. "I know you just did this so I can earn you your money back, but
still... thanks."

Thanks? Mr. Gold shifted in his chair. "You're welcome." I believe that's the expected response.
To signal that their business was truly completed, he turned his attention to polishing the handle of his cane—and yet the prince lingered. *Awkward. Can't he tell this transaction is over?* Arranging his face into his most amiable expression, he craned his head back to gaze at young Thomas. Then he raised his eyebrows. "And how's your lovely wife?"

Thomas narrowed his eyes. "Don't push it, wizard." Then he strode out of the kitchen after his friends.

Chapter End Notes

With the length of time this story is taking to post, did you remember Prince Thomas trying to get his guitar out of hock (back in chapter 4)? Or it short-circuiting in the rain (in chapter 33)?
Don't Mistake All This as an Invitation

Chapter Summary

Archie can't avoid an unwanted guest.
Mr. Gold wants to avoid all the guests.
Snow learns what an unwanted guest did.
Belle finds an unexpected guest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dr. Whale (Victor Frankenstein): Sometimes, it's easier to talk to someone when you don't give a crap what they think. (The Shepherd)

Archie placed two clean crystal goblets on his kitchen table then pulled up a seat as Vincent uncorked the wine.

"Just enough for a toast," Vincent assured him.

Archie smiled. "To meeting again soon and—" he took a breath then took the plunge "—and true love."

Vincent didn't smile. Instead his eyes were searching. Picking up his glass, he leaned close enough to press his forehead against Archie's. "Yes. At long last, true love."

Archie's heart soared. They clinked glasses. Then the doorbell chimed.

Vincent leaned back. "It's nearly midnight. Who on earth...?"

Archie set his goblet down. "No idea. But I better go see." When he got to his feet, Vincent started to push his chair back, too. Archie shook his head.

With a sigh, Vincent settled back down. "I know. I should stay here. Our secret."

Archie gave him a guilty, grateful smile. Then the bell sounded again—three insistent rings. He hurried out of his kitchen and down his oak-paneled hall. As he passed his library, Pongo woke up, barking fiercely. Before his Dalmatian could dash out, Archie pushed him back and shut him in.

The bell rang again.

On the threshold, Archie straightened the sash on his green fleece robe and brushed a hand over his unkempt hair. He twisted the knob slowly, planning to crack the door just enough to dispatch whichever Storybrooke resident thought the middle of the night was a fine time for a visit. Then the door swept open, banging him on the nose.

On the doorstep stood Regina, shaking rain off her umbrella. "About time," she said and made to brush past him.

Quickly, Archie swept out his arms to block her. "It's—it's late."
Regina raised her eyebrows. "I need to talk."

"But—but... office hours. I have office hours. You need to—to—"

"Cora. I just found out she's alive and trying to reach Storybrooke."

"Your—your mother...? Oh." The flood of ghastly memories Regina had poured out to Archie rose like a tidal wave in his mind—murdered servants revivified, trees that grabbed her when she tried to flee, her true love's heart ripped from his chest. "C-c-cora. Yes, of course—of course, you need to talk."

He dropped his arms, but when Regina tried again to pass him, he began backing up the hallway. "Let's talk in my—my library." Pongo howled, and he retreated further. "My—my dining room." The evidence of his gourmet supper for two flashed in his mind, and he amended, "My—my living room."

Regina stopped, perching her knuckles on her hips. "Cricket, I need a drink. I'm going to your kitchen."

She lifted a hand. Remembering the numerous times that move had preceded an uncanny force slamming him against the wall, Archie cringed.

Regina rolled her eyes. "Puhleeze. It's just a gesture." Spike heels clicking on the hardwood floor, she strutted past.

"Not the—the kitchen," Archie mumbled as he rushed ahead of Regina. He planted himself in the doorway, successfully stalling her entry but too late to block her view.

Archie saw the exact moment Regina caught sight of Vincent. Her expression soured, and she muttered, "You have company." Then her eyes widened as if it had just occurred to her that a silk dressing gown was not the usual attire of an evening guest. "Well, well, well. You have company."

She arched an eyebrow. "This is a surprise."

Once more, Regina lifted a hand and, cowed, Archie let her pass. She kept her hand out for the few steps it took to reach the table, and graciously, Vincent rose from his chair and shook it.

"Naturally, you know who I am," Regina said, "but I can't recall your story."

Apprehensive, Archie watched Vincent quirk a smile. Considering all the private messages they'd exchanged about his adventures in counseling, he had no doubt his friend had already identified Regina. Sure enough, he replied, "Madame Mayor, I'm Vincent Chalmers."

"And you know the doctor from—?"

The question made Archie's stomach twist. Before he could think of how to stop him, Vincent answered. "Graduate school. We both earned our Ph.D.'s in psychology from State University of New York."

Archie sagged against the door-frame. When he'd friended Vincent on Facebook, he'd conceded the risks of exposing Storybrooke to him. He hadn't considered the risks of exposing Vincent to Storybrooke—and certainly not to the volatile, sometimes good, more often downright, no-holds-barred bad Regina. If I fall on my knees begging, will she spare him?

Then Regina did something he'd never expected: she turned to him with a smile. "Memories of university—you share them. And now you've come together in the flesh."

Tossing her hair, she
strode over to where he kept his wineglasses. "No need to thank me but you're welcome."

Archie released his tightly held breath. Regina had interpreted Vincent's memories of graduate school as implanted by her curse. While her back was turned, his imaginary-friend-turned-real-friend shot him a look of unbridled amusement. Apparently, meeting the flamboyant star of so many anecdotes was a real treat. Archie returned a weak smile. *We're not out of the woods yet.*

Snagging a goblet from the cupboard, Regina resumed talking. "Tonight, everyone except me has someone. Even that vicious little imp Gold was gallivanting around with Belle again. But you? It never crossed my mind." She glanced from Archie back to Vincent. "Frankly, I'd assumed all those years of being a cricket had made the doctor asexual—like a fairy."

Archie grimaced. Then quickly, before Regina had a chance to look back at him, he circled his finger next to his head in the universal sign for crazy. Vincent's eyelids flickered in acknowledgement, but he didn't take his attention from Regina.

Like the born-to-it queen she was, Regina basked in it. "I like you. I came to discuss my mother with the doctor, but there's no reason not to include you too. After all, if she gets to Storybrooke, you'll be as affected as anyone."

Anxiously, Archie shook his head, and Vincent complied. "I probably wouldn't be much help. I'm not trained in counseling."

Regina extended her goblet for Vincent to fill. "But you do have a full psychology doctorate planted in your head."

His lips quivered as if suppressing a laugh. "So they tell me."

"Well, then." Regina took a delicate, lady-like sip. "I'm sure you'd agree that a queen who relies on only one adviser is a fool."

Behind Regina's back, Archie continued shaking his head, silently urging Vincent to stay firm on *No,* but when she turned to face him, he hastily switched to nodding.

"It's settled. Let's talk in the living room." Chin high, Regina sashayed out of the kitchen. "And bring the wine."

Grinning at Archie, Vincent raised his hands in surrender.

Archie shrugged. Obviously, his friend was tickled at the prospect of joining Regina's counseling session. At least her invitation absolved him of his unprofessional breach of confidentiality in sharing her stories in the first place.

Dangling their wineglasses and the bottle, Vincent drew close enough to nuzzle Archie's neck. Together, they watched Regina continue down the hall and enter the living room.

"Regina... she... she..." Archie had no idea how to explain the odd things Vincent had just heard. But in a moment, he found he didn't need to. His friend did it for him.

"...has boundary issues. And so grandiose! No wonder you code-named her 'the Evil Queen.' That's how she sees herself."

"Mm," responded Archie.

"And such peculiar ideas!" Vincent shook his head. "I never knew you played Cricket, but why on
earth would anyone think that years of it would make someone asexual? I've never heard of any particular injuries associated with the game."

Archie relaxed. He didn't know the first thing about playing Cricket, but he could read up on it. Giving Vincent a peck on the cheek, he assured himself that—so long as Regina stayed on her Twelve Step Program and didn't use magic—any outrageous statement she made could be reinterpreted as something earthbound. "Best not to keep the Evil Queen waiting."

"Definitely, not." Vincent chuckled. "And one last thing: were my ears deceiving me or did she actually call us fairies?"

---

Mr. Gold knew that when he reflected back on Pinocchio's party in the coming weeks, he'd see its benefits. Right now, he was finding it one of the most grueling trials he'd ever endured in his long, long life. If only he could have stayed in the kitchen, chatting with Geppetto. That had been tolerable. But no—Belle had returned to collect him. And instead of taking his foot nudges, coughs, and scowls as hints, Geppetto had said, Don't mind me. Go have fun with your young lady.

Fun. Mr. Gold compressed his lips in a thin line. The old man wasn't as insightful as he'd thought.

Now Belle was giving him a hint of her own: an arm squeeze alerting him that the freckled young man standing before him was expecting a response. A century before, the Dark One had given his great-great-grandfather Bartholomew a self-propagating hat in exchange for a bushel of rather tasty cranberries, but what young Bart wanted from him now was unclear—and that made Mr. Gold suspicious.

"As I told all of you earlier, I have ample reason to pursue a way to circumvent the memory loss curse that plagues Storybrooke's border—and I have a place to visit when I do—but that reason and that place are my own." There. I responded.

"Um. Okay." Bart rocked from foot to foot. "Maybe I should—"

"Paris," Belle said suddenly. "Rumple, didn't you agree that Paris sounds appealing?"

"Hey, Paris. Gargoyles." Bart rubbed his jaw. Then he looked over his shoulder. "I, uh, see someone. Uh..." When he hurried away, he didn't glance back.

Mr. Gold released his breath. Then Belle released hers, and the exasperation in it made him wince.

"'That reason and that place are my own'? Really, Rumple. All he asked is which earth city you'd most like to visit."

"What business was that of Mr. Cubbins'?" Leaning on his cane, Mr. Gold glanced at Belle sidelong. He wished he could fathom what he'd done to perturb her. Surely, she hadn't expected him to share his true answer: Whichever city blood magic tells me holds my lost son.

Belle shook her head. "Poor Rumple. Small talk is torture for you, isn't it? I don't have a problem with leaving. Just let me find August—"

Ach, now I'm ruining Belle's fun. "No, Sweetheart, please. I'm not returning us to isolation. It's just... my leg," and my neck, my back, and my aching head. "Let me sit a while." Mr. Gold scanned the living room. "These couches and chairs are full—" thank goodness "—but I can find another spot. Ruby wanted to tell you her idea for a 'Get to Know Your Earth' book club. After I take a breather, I'll come find you." And have another go at the ordeal of small talk.
"Are you sure?"

"I promise."

A moment later, Mr. Gold was gratefully limping up the hallway with his cane. The open doors to the dining room, the den, and the kitchen revealed swarms of bothersome guests, but the fourth door was invitingly shut.

*Geppetto's workshop. Sanctuary! Nobody will be milling about in there.*

---

When Snow had been the next after Inigo to leave the cave, zooming up through the well of lightning sand, she had been impressed at how rapidly a single man could work the pulley. When she emerged and ripped the wet cloth from her face, she'd been astounded to find just Tinker Bell hoisting the thick rope over her shoulder and pulling it with her teensy-weensy hands.

Tink's answer to "Where's Inigo?" had been her usual flurry of indecipherable jingles. Snow had been staring at her, wishing for an obliging bluebird to come along and translate, when she heard her daughter scream.

Immediately, Snow had lit out running—ducking tree branches, slogging through bogs, and leaping across fire spouts between blasts. The stark terror of Emma's agonizingly long wail had pushed her to risks she hadn't taken since her bandit days dodging Regina's minions. And when that scream stopped, Snow's dread of finding her darling dead impelled her to run even faster.

Now Snow's thoughts were skipping around like frogs on pond stones—absolute joy every time she looked at her daughter; undying gratitude whenever her eyes paused on their newest companion, Inigo; worry when she wondered what tragedy was making Peter Pan hang his head.

Emma's relationship with the symbol of eternal youth was clearly the opposite of what it had been the night before. As they walked back to camp, she kept an arm slung across his back and her head on his shoulder. Snow couldn't hear what her daughter was whispering, but it sounded as tender as a mother soothing a child. When their little group reached the lookout tree, Emma stopped talking to conduct her usual methodical scan of the task at hand, but she didn't take her arm from Peter.

"All right, then," Emma said. "If the guys boost Mary-Margaret up and I climb atop her shoulders, then I can grab the hammock."

"We could wait for Tink." Peter's first words since Snow had joined them sounded disturbingly hollow.

Emma hugged Peter then released him to zip up her jacket. "Nonsense," she said in what sounded to Snow like an overly jolly voice. "She's busy. The sooner I can get my hands on the compass and hang it around my neck, the sooner I can rest."

Emma took charge directing Inigo and Peter to lift her mother until she was standing on their hands, braced against the trunk. Snow knew she had more leadership experience, but it was good to give her daughter the opportunity. But when Emma began crawling up her back, despite Snow's best intentions, she voiced a piece of advice: "I agree with Peter. Why don't we just wait for Tink?"

"I have my reasons," Emma muttered.

She continued climbing until her bare feet were set firmly on her mother's shoulders. The weight made Snow grimace. Then Emma got hold of the hammock and lifted herself higher.
The riskiest part of the climb. Snow held her breath until her daughter announced, "I'm up on the hammock." She took a breath. But in a moment, Emma's shout turned her relief to dismay.

"The compass! I know where I left it, and it's not here. That crazy evil bitch has it. Where else could it be?"

Cora. Just thinking the name sent a chill down Snow's spine. With the compass, she can find Storybrooke and Charming and Henry. What are we going to do now?

Belle studied her cards. Two rounds of adding and dropping, yet her hand was still an eclectic mess. Unlucky at cards, lucky in love, she told herself. With the most important part of her life blossoming so beautifully tonight, she could accept a little bad fortune at Poker.

"I fold," Belle announced. Then she sat back to amuse herself observing the others. Goldilocks, Jill, Jack, and Ruby were striving to keep their faces blank. During the three games she'd played, only August had been able to talk and laugh without a single twitch betraying whether his cards were good, bad, or rubbish. Now that Rumple had rid him of his telltale wooden nose, he had free rein to be a rascal.

But those looks he's shooting Ruby—those I believe.

When knocking sounded from outside, her best friend broke her poker face by raising an eyebrow. "Another guest? Wow. How many people did you invite, August?"

Smiling, Belle pushed back from the card table. "I'll get it."

The tapping continued until she reached the front door. When she swung it open, the new arrival surprised her. "Mr. Smee?" August certainly has a wide acquaintance.

"Miss Belle. You alone?"

"Hardly," she answered. "The party's in full swing."

"Party?" He took a step nearer. "Never mind them. You're who I want to see. My tire is flat and—"

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Though from the alcohol on your breath, I think it's a good thing you can't drive. "I wouldn't know the first thing about how to change a tire, but—"

"And, and... my engine flooded." Mr. Smee's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, drawing Belle's attention to a patch of red puckered skin oozing pus on the side of his neck.

Ouch. "You poor thing. I'm afraid I can't fix your car, but I can help with that burn. Come in and let me put some ice on it. I'm sure Geppetto has some salve somewhere."

"And, and, and—" His eyes wide and frightened, Mr. Smee clutched the collar of his navy blue pea coat "—I lost a puppy."
Just to orient you: The story starts on a Monday a couple of days before "Child of the Moon" and has reached Friday (going into Saturday) a couple of days after. The time is November 2012 (when the episode aired), which is the reason for references to things like Dance Central.

Anyone know the book in which Bartholomew Cubbins appears?
As Belle stared at Mr. Smee, her forehead pinched together. Individually, the flat tire and the flooded engine were plausible, but the two together were a bit of a coincidence. And his third crisis sounded more like one of his iffy excuses to her father for why he’d missed delivering a bouquet. “You're telling me you lost a puppy? Really?”

Behind her, Belle heard a squeal of delight. “A puppy? I love puppies.” Papagena pushed in beside her and Mr. Smee backed up a step. Her friend twisted to look over her shoulder. “Betty! Bo! This man lost a cute little puppy! Poor thing must be cold and wet. Let's help him look.”

As two more women joined her in the doorway, Belle kept her eyes trained on Mr. Smee. One hand clutched the collar of his peacoat while his other slid up to clamp his red wool cap to his head. Is he preparing to make a run for it?

Lifting her chin, Belle called out, “Anyone know how to change a flat? Fix a flooded engine?”

The response was immediate: “Let's get Mr. Gold.” “What? You think I can't do it?” “Prove it.” In a moment, three very large young men joined the women in the entryway. Mr. Smee shrank back a few steps more, past the porch awning and into the rain.

Belle folded her arms. “What do you say? Do you need our help?”

“I—I—I—” Mr. Smee kept backing up until he bumped Geppetto's picket fence. Turning, he fumbled with the latch, thrust open the gate, and jogged toward a little red truck parked beneath a lamppost across the street.

“Hey!” muttered the stockiest of the young men flanking Belle, “that looks like my dad's truck.” He squeezed past and began running, his two friends close behind. All three pushed through the gate, just as Mr. Smee scrambled into the cab and slammed the door. When the engine roared to life, the three young men began banging on the truck's side. Before they could do anything further, Mr. Smee screeched away from the curb.

“Huh,” Bo said. “I thought vehicles couldn't start with flooded engines. Sometimes, I think I'll never get the hang of these earth carriages.”

“But what about the puppy?” Papagena asked.
Belle patted her shoulder. “I don't think we need to worry about a puppy.”

As August straightened the stack of cards to slip them back in the box, he saw Belle returning. “Hey, sorry you missed the last hand. The Pumpkin Coach is playing another set, so I'm clearing up to make room.”

Belle nodded. Always helpful, she began scooping his pile of penny winnings into the empty candy bowl. “You'll never guess who was at the door: Mr. Smee. He works for—”

“Captain Hook,” August finished.

Belle frowned, her eyes thoughtful. “I was about to say my father. Mr. Smee drives the Game of Thrones delivery van. I keep forgetting… Mr. Smee used to be a pirate…” Shaking her head, she quirked a smile. “I can't imagine he was very good at it.”

_Not from how Neal described him, anyway._ August fastened the tabs on the card box and handed it to Belle. While she moved everything to a bookshelf, he tipped the table on its side. “So… what did he want?”

Belle's shoulders bobbed up. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“Well, good thing the knock wasn't another guest,” August said as he folded the table's legs. “The house is full to bursting as it is.” Already a dozen had trooped back into the living room, gathering in front of the band's amp, microphones, and instruments.

Belle cocked her head. “At the charity concert, Happy told me he and the guys were coming, but I haven't seen a single one of them.”

August grinned. No need for Belle to explain who the guys were. Mentioning one of the seven dwarfs implied the whole as-much-fun-as-a-barrel-of-monkeys crew. “I set up the spare bedroom upstairs as a conversation spot—candles, soft music.” _A make out corner, I'd hoped. Talk about wishful thinking! When the guys showed, Blue corralled them up there for a chat._ Though from the looks Dopey and Sleepy exchanged, I think they were expecting a lecture.

Neal stared at Emma. By the light of the cattail torch Inigo had lit, her tangled hair glowed like an aura while her blue-green eyes sparkled like pools of water. The sight made him yearn for another session in the lookout hammock. But what she was saying—that made him wish he had a door to slam to show that her assertion was garbage and he didn't want to hear it again.

“What?” Emma persisted. “No answer? That must mean you think I'm right. Tinker Bell took the compass.”

Neal ground his teeth. “If only you knew how stupid that statement is.”

“Oh, yeah?” Emma folded her arms. “Who else could have gotten up in that tree without any help?”

“Any number of things: a devil bat, a crow crony, the evil sorceress herself. You don't know how resourceful these dark magicians can be.”

Emma lifted her chin. “Huh. And you do?”

Neal released a snort. “Believe me. I do.”
Emma glanced from her mother to Inigo. Both companions averted their eyes to their own feet. “Okay, then. Why has Tinker Bell been acting so suspicious?”

“Suspicious?!”

“Leaving those last four zombies intact. Why didn't she blast their heads, too?”

Neal glared at Emma. He'd never realized it before, but clearly the love of his life had a grudge against the closest comrade he'd ever had. “For the same reason I didn't bash their brains in. Guffie, Poolie, Dawdles, and Mucker were her mates. Why would it occur to her they'd attack us?”

Emma pursed her lips. “Okay, well, what about earlier when you were fighting alone? When she started flying me in the opposite direction? At the time I thought you told her to, but then I found out you hadn't even seen her.”

Neal shifted his weight. “Well, maybe she anticipated what I would have told her. She can do that, you know. She's a fairy.”

“Darling, he's right,” Snow put in. “I've seen fairies show up while you're still wondering if you should call them.”

Neal stuck his jaw out. Finally, some support.

Emma turned on her mother. “So, now you're claiming Tinker Bell is just a regular old fairy—after you told me you'd never known one who could only speak jingle bell and who couldn't change her size.”

“Wow. You're really going to go there? You're really going to blame the victim?” Before, Neal's indignation had been simmering. Now it boiled into outrage. “Yeah, Tink used to be able to speak any creature's language and change to any size—until she got zapped. We never knew who did it to her, but we always knew why.”

Frowning, Emma dipped her chin. “Zapped? Why?”

Neal centered his gaze on Emma until she finally raised her eyes to his. If there was one thing she had to understand about his little fairy friend, it was this. “Because she saved my life.”

When Mr. Gold opened the one closed door on the hallway, he was faced with a downward flight of stairs. In pointing out where he did his woodworking, Geppetto had neglected to mention it was in the basement. Just my luck. My leg feels as if it's on fire, and naturally, my destination requires climbing. But then he considered the swarms of party-goers hungrily seeking what he was most loath to give—small talk—and he sighed. Down the stairs I go.

The descent was painful—no other way to describe it—and each step down meant one more step he'd have to drag himself up when he could no longer delay his promise to come look for Belle. But the need to sit quietly and rest his overtaxed mind was overwhelming. Gripping the hand rail and repositioning his cane, he lowered his good leg another step and swung the bad one after it.

When Mr. Gold had accomplished half the staircase, he heard rustling. Mice? No matter. I can handle mice. He concentrated on the next few steps until he caught a more unexpected sound. Is that a child cooing?

Mr. Gold stopped to listen. As unlikely as the possibility was, apparently a child just mature enough to babble had found a way into Geppetto's basement. With all the saws, awls, and whittling knives
no doubt cluttering the place, that child wasn't safe.

Gritting his teeth, Mr. Gold hastened his descent, wincing with every step. By the time he reached bottom, he was panting. Without pausing to catch his breath, he rounded the corner into the workshop proper and scanned the sawdust strewn floor.

*No child.* Relieved, Mr. Gold released his breath. Then he spotted a pair of tiny pink sneakers, poking out of the shadows beside a tall, carved cabinet. Curious, he limped forward. “Come out, dear. It's only me.”

In reply, he heard a half-moan, half-squeak.

Mr. Gold tipped his head. “Cinderella?” He'd been wondering where Prince Thomas's wife was hiding herself, but he'd never imagined she'd be doing it literally. “You may not be wearing glass slippers, Cinderella, but you can't disguise those size-four feet from me.”

Slowly, the one Enchanted Forest deal-breaker to ever escape his payback emerged into the wan light of the workshop, her one-year-old daughter clutched in her arms. The look on her face was part defiance, part terror. “Don't take my baby.”

Archie gazed at Vincent. His unbelievably real, newfound best friend was not only sexy, smart, and handsome, he was also the most sensitive man he'd ever known. Factually, he and Regina were not quite talking about the same things, but emotionally, they'd connected.

Vincent cradled his goblet as he spoke. “When your mother, as you put it, 'ripped out Daniel's heart,' she prevented you from marrying him.”

Regina sniggered. “That's an understatement.”

Though Archie had never before seen Regina less than enraged about the single most horrifying incident she'd shared about her life, her laid-back reaction tonight wasn't altogether surprising. While he and Vincent were slowly nursing their second glasses of wine, she was in the middle of her second bottle.

“And she did it because—?”

“She wanted me to marry Leopold. Hmph, Leopold! Grizzle in his ears, grizzle in his nose, chest like a lumpy old boot, and halitosis to wake the dead, but the only thing Mother cared about was that he'd make me a queen.” Regina shrugged and took another gulp of wine. “Mommy knows best.”

Placing his goblet on the side table, Vincent leaned toward Regina. “It sounds to me like you're being kinder than she deserves. From the things you've said, it's doubtful that what was best for you even crossed your mother's mind. Her desire was to live through you. She decided you would be a 'queen' because she wasn't able to be a 'queen' herself.”

Regina gave a little sob. Then she grasped Vincent's hands. “That's it, doctor. Just so. She's heartless. How did you know?”

Archie sat quietly, pleased to see Regina have a moment. *Maybe I should offer her wine in our future sessions, too.*

Releasing Vincent's hands, Regina sank back in her chair. Then she slid down until her red dress bunched up around her thighs. “We showed her, Ruh, uh, Rump, uh, Rumpy, uh... the imp and I. Cora didn't get to be Queen Mother. She didn't even get to come to the wedding. 'Cause we banished
Vincent nodded. “And yet, even though you managed to banish her from your life, you're still faithfully following her wishes.”

A scowl descended on Regina's elegant face. “I am not.” Then her annoyance dissipated into uncertainty. “Am I?”

Vincent held his hands out, palms up. “You see yourself as a 'queen,' don't you? And not just any 'queen.' You see yourself as the kind of 'queen' you imagine your mother would have been if she had been 'queen' herself.”

“The Evil Queen,” Regina answered in a quavering voice. Then she broke down in tears.

“Okay,” Emma said. “I'm listening.”

Neal rubbed his forehead. Then slowly, he sank down cross-legged. Emma hesitated. More than anything, she wanted to reach out and hug him. But, no—this who-to-trust thing had to be worked out first. She sat down across from him. She saw Inigo and her mother exchange glances. Then slowly they settled down on the ground, too.

“Remember me mentioning Reul Gorm?”

Emma's mouth twisted. “Yeah. She's the fairy that told you to ditch me.” Already this didn't sound like a good thing.

Neal nodded. “As fairies go, she's the top dog, the head honcho, the big cheese. Tink used to work for her, but she was always a bit independent.” He smiled. “She'd do every job Reul Gorm gave her, but she always ran a couple side projects, too. Her favorite was rescuing lost boys and flying them to Neverland where they could look after themselves. It was such a noble thing to do, Reul Gorm couldn't say no, but she always warned her it would get her into trouble.”

*Neal's making his friend sound like Saint Tink.* Emma was not convinced.

“Well, one day, Reul Gorm got wind of some nasty counterforce that didn't want Tink doing what she was doing. She told her to stop taking the risk, that her other duties were primary, that the rest was none of her business, that if she got hurt, don't come crying to her.”

“And this nasty counterforce was—?”

“No idea.” Neal shrugged. “For a while, Tink obeyed. After all, Reul Gorm was her boss. She left kids wandering the streets, though it broke her heart. Soon she started sneaking into other realms, seeing if there were other places she should set up her little charity. One night, cruising around Earth, she saw me.”

Emma's forehead wrinkled. “Why were you a lost boy?”

Neal sighed. “I told you I originally came from the Enchanted Forest, but I didn't tell you how I left it. When I was fifteen, I jumped through a portal, smack dab into the middle of an English country graveyard.” He took a deep breath. “In the mid-seventeen-hundreds.”

Emma gaped. “Seriously?” *When we met, you didn't look a day over twenty-three.*

Neal nodded. “I don't know what they'd have made of me if I'd fallen into London—maybe put me
on display in the National Museum—but in that tiny village, they thought I was a demon.”

Emma sucked air through her teeth. *Trouble, all right.*

“The vicar was a good-hearted guy and, more important, he was sensible. He took me in, dressed me like an Englishman, changed my name from Baelfire to Peter to calm people's superstitions, but it was no use. He had no reasonable earth explanation for how I could have just appeared in the middle of a funeral. For the next three days, if anything odd happened, the village blamed me. One thing led to another until finally, I was running from a mob. When I hid in a shed, they set it on fire.”

Emma leaned forward. “And Tinker Bell?”

“The moment I screamed, she popped up before me. I'd met one fairy before—Reul Gorm—but Tink was something else. That first time I saw her, she was the size of a grown woman. She called me by name, grabbed my hand, and told me to hang on. Then she flew me up through the roof, straight into the sky.”

Emma could see a reminiscent smile on Neal's face. It made her smile, too.

“Tink started to explain Neverland to me, what I'd find there and how I’d get by. But just as we neared the second star to the right, a big, purple bolt of magic struck her. Instantly, she shrank to the size of a butterfly and her voice changed to nothing but jingles. But that didn't stop Tink. She kept her grip on me, even though it took both her arms just to hold my wrist, and she hauled me to safety.”

“That's some fairy!” Inigo exclaimed.

Neal nodded, but he kept his eyes on Emma. “And her voice and size weren't the only things Tink lost by rescuing me. After disobeying Reul Gorm, she couldn't go back. She's been a rogue fairy ever since.”

Emma drew a deep breath and let it out again. “That's a helluva good reason to trust Tinker Bell.”

“She's had my back—well, all our backs—hundreds of times since.”

Emma reached out and squeezed Neal's hand. “I get it.” *But that still doesn't explain the pine cone.*

Chapter End Notes

Archie's counseling scenes with Mr. Gold were some of my favorites to write. Coming up with one for Regina was particularly fun.

End Notes

Endnote for the whole story:

I started writing after "Child of the Moon" (2x7) aired and posted a version of the first half on
FanFiction.net under the title "Waylaid." Since then, I've changed my nom from DjinniFires to Debrah Clachair. The material in chapters 1 to 50 were previously on FFN but have now been cut into one-sitting-sized reads. Four scenes were added to improve transitions and some minor clues were dropped in pointing to what happens in the second half. The absolutely new chapters 51 to 100 were not previously on FFN.

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