Villains of a Sort

by GAvillain

Summary

Maleficent and her Overtakers from across many worlds were defeated, and their schemes to harness the power of the Book of Prophecies were undone thanks to Sora and his friends. Now they find themselves in the clutches of the fearsome Master Octomus. The Overtakers may have been villains and cutthroats, but the Master is something infinitely worse. However, the villains have been down and out before, and one thing has always remained true: never underestimate them.

Part two of Quite a Glittering Assemblage. This fic probably won't make a ton of sense if you haven't read the first part unless you're just really good at going with the flow. Though I do make every effort possible to catch you up if you haven't read any of the previous fic.

A Kingdom Hearts based crossover with various other fandoms featured as "Other Worlds." The main characters are a villain team who do villainous things but (for the most part) genuinely like each other. Contains M/M, M/F, and F/F ships. Tags will be updated as pertinent. Only major characters are tagged.
Notes

Previously on Quite a Glittering Assemblage:

Following the events of Kingdom Hearts: Dream Drop Distance, Maleficent had begun to seek the fabled Book of Prophecies to rewrite all of reality to meet her vision. To aid in her quest, she recruited Hades, Ursula, Doctor Doom, Loki, Russell Edgington, and Fish Mooney to form the Overtakers.

The Overtakers ventured through various other worlds in search of the fabled book and, along the way, added to their alliance Jafar, Blackheart, Steve Newlin, Cruella De Vil, the Evil Queen Grimhilde, a dark resurrected version of Killian "Captain Hook" Jones, and the Sanderson Sisters. Their quest earned them such treasures as the Isle of Avalon and the Black Cauldron.

Eventually, the Overtakers learned that the "Book of Prophecies" was no mere book. It was actually the power of a mysterious entity known as The Author that they sought. After stealing a magic pen from Storybrooke and obtaining magical ink from a man named Ardyn Izunia, they learned the identity of the Author: Sora's friend Naminé.

The Overtakers managed to get the better of their rival for power, Master Xehanort, thanks to the help of a gathering of allies from many worlds that they dubbed the Undertakers. However, their acts of evil throughout the worlds inadvertently brought together a team of heroes bent on stopping them. Before the Overtakers could conquer the universe, the heroes thwarted their schemes and freed Avalon.

The heroes went on to fight other dark forces that had gathered across the worlds. Meanwhile the core Overtakers, licking their wounds from the final battle, were enslaved by an interdimensional evil entity known as the Master....
The title credits of the most watched television talk show in Radiant Garden flashed onto the screen: *What's New With Newlin?* A catchy little ditty played as the camera panned over to Steve Newlin sitting in a well lit studio room with a comfortable chair and two decorative ferns. Steve, as ever, had a big grin on his face as the producer's voice introduced him.

"Good afternoon Radiant Garden, and thank you for tuning in!" Steve said. "This is *What's New With Newlin?* where you get the hard hitting journalism that you deserve to keep our city healthy and prosperous. Now we're goin' on a month since these alleged 'war criminals' from Avalon were extradited and imprisoned here in Radiant Garden, and we only just this morning received a statement from the Restoration Committee. Can we play the clip, please?"

The scene cut to Cid Highwind standing at a podium in front of a crowd of reporters, obviously looking uncomfortable to be there.

"The criminals we've got locked up in the Super-Max Prison were Maleficent's Undertakers," Cid explained to the crowd. "They were defeated in Sora's quest to free Avalon from Maleficent's tyranny. We've got 'em locked up safe and secure. Ya got nothin' to worry about. We're also still workin' on cleanin' up the mess in Zero District that Professor Ratigan caused. He is, at the moment, still at large."

A reporter raised their hand and chimed in. "Why are we incarcerating criminals from another world? Why is any of this our problem?"

"Are you f-" a censor bleep sounded, "stupid?" Cid asked. "They're bad guys, and somebody's gotta keep 'em locked up so they don't come and kill people."

The clip cut back to Steve Newlin looking particularly smug.

"Don't ya just love it when the people who are supposed to represent your needs curse at you?" Steve asked, sarcastically. "Makes them totally seem like the type of stable person you want in charge. But let's pretend for a second that the Restoration Committee is telling us the truth: that these are highly dangerous criminals. Then why are we importing them to be in prison here? Why are they not Avalon's problem? Why are our tax dollars going towards paying for these people to be locked up? Why are we being asked... no, not asked, *forced* to accept that murderers and rapists are being housed right in our backyard? When one of them escapes, and one of them will eventually, who are they going to rape and murder? All of us! And we got no vote on that at all!

"But let's take a step even further back," Steve said, calming his tone down. "We don't know who these people are. We don't know anything about them. They are being held without trial indefinitely on the word of a Restoration Committee with no true political authority. I believe in 'innocent until proven guilty,' don't you? Our constitution *protects* habeas corpus. Our constitution has a *process* for this kind of thing, and *it is being ignored*. And if that doesn't scare you, you need to WAKE UP! The Restoration Committee is acting as an absolute monarch in the absence Ansem the Wise, and it has put forth absolutely no plans for fair elections. It's their world, and us ordinary folks are just living in it."

Steve Newlin pulled back and let a moment of silence give his viewers time to digest his words.
before speaking again.

"Alright, we've got some callers at home from viewers like you. Michelle from the North Side, you're on air!"

"I get so scared listening to your show every day," Michelle began. "And my anxiety has gotten so much worse since I started. But then I realized that I was anxious because you're speaking the truth, and the truth is scary. I don't want my kids growing up in a place like this."

"It is! It's a terrifying world out there," Steve said. "But ignorance of the horrible things happening isn't true safety. It's an illusion, and I'm so glad you're waking up to it."

"What do you suggest we do about all this?" Michelle asked.

"Well, Michelle, we make our voices heard," Steve replied. "They can't ignore the will of the people for much longer. We need to push for a fair election. The king ain't comin' back, so we need a Prime Minister chosen by the people to lead this great city into the future. Alright, next caller is Wedge from Castle-Town. How ya doin'? You're on the air."

"Thanks, man!" Wedge said. "I'm just fired up by what that old b-" a censor bleep. "said to that reporter. It's like there's no decency in the world, man!"

"It's disheartening."

"I think we need a well stocked militia," Wedge said. "They can't say no to us if we've all got our guns pointed at 'em."

"Now I do NOT condone acts of violence," Steve clarified. "Otherwise we're no better than gang bangers like Ratigan. Non-violent protest is the only way forward. However, hold onto those guns. We have the right to defend ourselves, and there may come a day when we need to. Okay, next caller is also from Castle-Town, you're on the air Rikku."

"Yeah, how 'bout you tell your viewers how you're under investigation for the disappearance of over half of your Midnight Fellowship congregation," Rikku said. "You're just another villain full of fooifie!"

"Not THAT outrageous claim is fooifie," Steve said, hanging up. "Folks, I will always be honest with you: yes, the disappearance of half of my congregation is being investigated. However, I am not personally under investigation, nor am I a suspect. My church and I are cooperating fully with the investigation, and my heart goes out to everyone still missing a loved one. I am personally in pain from my missing flock. I loved each and every one of the men and women who disappeared. And that is the honest to gods truth!"

"Turn that shit off," Cid barked from underneath the control panel.

Ienzo did so just as Steve started to take a caller about Gummi Ship chem-trails.

"We're losing the town," Ienzo said. "Maleficent's not going to give up until she gets her people back. Her other Overtakers are powerful, but this one... this one is practically making me doubt myself."

"He's a fuckin' smug little prick," Cid barked. "I'd like to knock his pretty perfect teeth out."

"And you didn't help things by going off on that reporter," Ienzo said. "If you couldn't keep your cool, then why did you volunteer to do a press conference?" Ienzo let out a deep sigh. "We're going
to have to do something to keep the townsfolk happy. Maybe it is time to start having elections?"

"That's just askin' for Maleficent to snag real political power," Cid said as he slid out from under the terminal and wiped the grease off his hands. "At least right now, all she's got is words. Dammit, I liked it better when you just beat the shit outta villains and they did the same. Now they've got it all jumbled up. It's a fuckin' trainwreck!"

"No arguments there," Ienzo said. "By the way, I'm beginning to get worried about Dilan. He's been on vacation without checking in for weeks now. Aeleus is covering his shifts at the Super-Max, but he can't keep doing that forever. That man likes to act strong, but even he needs to sleep sometimes."

"Leon's the same way," Cid said. "Maybe when Sora and the gang get back from their world tour, they can take a few shifts off our hands."

"Any word from Sora?" Ienzo asked.

"They've got their hands full in Agrabah right now," Cid answered. "Mirage apparently made a bigger mess of things over there than Ratigan and the Heartless did over here. And then Twilight Town is still not respondin' to any communications, so Sora's already fearin' the worst."

Ienzo shook his head in sorrow. "May the gods have mercy on all of us."

Yet some gods were in no condition to bestow mercy upon anyone. Loki, the God of Mischief, stalked the shadows of the Eminence Palace, the castle once known as the Castle That Never Was. In the recent past, the shadows would have comforted the Liesmith, as darkness was his forte. However, ever since the Master came into power, Loki had good reason to fear what was lurking in the dark. He may have been a god, but the Master was something beyond even that.

Loki stood there waiting, obstructed from view. He kept checking around him for anything slithering or slinking about. Once Doctor Doom passed by, Loki pulled his lover into the shadows, away from prying eyes.

"Forewarning would be appreciated," Doom grumbled.

"Is the great Victor von Doom afraid of the dark now?" Loki teased.

"Doom fears nothing," he boasted, though Loki knew that to be a lie.

The Master had shaken everyone in the Overtakers to their core. Once, they were the most fearsome villains in all the worlds. Now, they constantly looked over their shoulders for red tentacles slithering towards them.

"I have confirmed our suspicions," Loki whispered. "The Master has not left the lowest chamber. He has created something of a nest of darkness down there. Even with my powers of illusion and deception, I could barely evade his notice. He's not with anyone or sleeping or anything remotely resembling anything logical. He's just... dwelling in the dark."

"It is almost as if the beast is incubating before he infects us all," Doom suggested. "If it weren't for his miserable minions, perhaps we could escape his notice and dispose of him permanently."

"That would take Maleficent's help to accomplish," Loki reminded him, "which, I believe, was your task to complete."

"Her fighting spirit is gone," Doom said. "It's as if she has simply accepted her fate as a lackey. I
have not been able to successfully rouse her from her misery."

Loki raised his eyebrow and sighed. "Did you at least try to be polite, or did you just bark at her like some dog with no understanding of subtlety?"

"Doom is no motivational speaker," he replied. "After my unsuccessful attempt, I delegated that task to Hades. If anyone can get through to her, it is him."

"How are the ill?" Loki asked.

"Unchanged," Doom answered. "Ursula is doing all that she can, but I fear we may need to allow Grimhilde and Winifred to perish. Once we are free of the Master's grip, we can find a way to resurrect them."

Loki and Doom both knew that though Doom had said "once," what he really meant was "if." The Master, to make his power known, had chosen to make examples out of Grimhilde and Winifred Sanderson. He had consumed their magic, and, since both had used magic to restore their youth, left both witches in a state of elderliness. Their bodies did not respond well to such a change.

"Oh how I rue the day I decided to return to this prison of a castle," Loki bemoaned.

"Bah! The Master would have managed to track you down on any world you fled to," Doom said. "We are under the beast's control because he wanted us. Our fate was sealed the moment he set his sights on our glittering assemblage."

"Well, I will destroy him," Loki vowed. "This I promise you. The Master will fall."

"What are you two whispering about?" a deep voice bellowed.

A man clad in purple and silver knight armor stood facing the two men, his eyes, as ever, obscured by a dark visor: Koragg, the Knight Wolf. Koragg was one of the Master's two lieutenants he had patrolling the upper levels of the Eminence Palace. This Koragg was technically the third servant of the Master to assume that name. Before he was Koragg, he was a former ally of Xehanort's by the name of Dilan who had come seeking out his previous master only to find a new Master instead. Koragg reigned as the master's head knight, though, as far as Loki and Doom were concerned, he was nothing more than a puppet.

Loki and Doom stepped out of the shadows. Loki magically discarded several articles of clothing to give himself a disheveled appearance.

"Some of us here actually enjoy pursuing sins of the flesh," Loki spat. "I was not aware the Master was opposed to carnal pleasure."

"Have a care," Koragg warned. "I am the Master's second in command in this castle, and you answer to me. Your dalliance is of little concern to me so long as it remains contained."

"Was there a point to your interference?" Doom asked. "Or have you come to simply throw your weight around?"

"Mind your tone," Koragg growled. "The king has requested your presence in the throne room immediately. The Master is ready to put his plan into motion."

"Far be it from me to keep his majesty waiting," Loki replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm and contempt.
Koragg escorted Doom and Loki into the throne room once known as Where Nothing Gathers. Once, this room was surrounded by thirteen high-sitting thrones. Now, all but one had been shattered into rubble, and the room's current occupant kept his throne lowered at a far less excessive level. Even though his throne did not tower over the room the way that Xehanort's once had, he still felt as tough he towered over the others standing on the floor before him.

Russell Edgington, Captain Hook, and Cruella De Vil were already standing there waiting when Loki and Doom arrived. Hook and Cruella were both sporting twin fang marks on their necks from where Russell had fed. With the vampire not being permitted to leave the castle, Fish, Hook, and Cruella opted to alternate keeping their ally fed until such time as he could chase after a prey that he could really sink his teeth into. Russell was very obviously itching for a kill.

The king looked down on the five Overtakers, his expression unreadable on his skull-like countenance. When the Master took over and saw the Black Cauldron for the first time, he pulled a soul out from the cauldron's maw. At first, the Overtakers thought it was Arawn, the Death-Lord himself, but they quickly learned that the being pulled forth was altogether different. He was the Horned King, a warlord from Prydain who attempted to use the Cauldron before it fell into the hands of the Overtakers. He had been trapped within the iron crucible for years. Now, this lich king served as the Master's general overseeing the Overtakers.

"What a handsome group Maleficent has assembled," the Horned King said in a raspy voice. "An outcast god, a tinkerer of machines and spells alike, a vampire turned abomination, the revenant of a pirate, and a fur clad harlot. It is not, however, my place to question those who the Master deems worthy to serve him."

"Well tell your bloody Master that he's about to lose two of his servants," Hook warned. "Grimhilde and Winifred will not survive much longer. Have some honor and let us go!"

The Horned King snapped his fingers, and Koragg punched Hook in the gut and slammed his elbow down between Hook's shoulder blades, forcing the captain down to his knees.

"I do not accept insolence," the Horned King warned. "This is no longer Maleficent's world. It is mine... on behalf of the Master of course. Now then, where was I? Ah yes... The Master hungers for a feast of light magic, but not just any light. He wants a light that is pure and succulent to consume. He wants a Princess of Heart."

"I was not aware we'd been reduced to mere delivery boys," Loki whispered to Doom.

"You five have been chosen to go," the Horned King said. "No more. No less. If any try to flee, you will be found, and you will be punished severely, as will your friends back here. Failure will not be tolerated. You will succeed, or you will die."

"Charming," Cruella remarked.

The Horned King opened a Corridor of Darkness in the middle of the chamber. "You are dismissed. Go now!"

None of the five Overtakers had to be told twice. Whatever their feelings were towards the Horned King or the Master, all of them longed for the freedom to leave the castle.

Steve Newlin returned to Villain's Vale after the broadcast and tossed his briefcase down on the couch next to where Demyx was plucking away at his sitar.

"Have you moved at all today?" Steve asked.
"I went to the bathroom," Demyx answered.

"Did you go on that recon mission I asked you to go on?" Steve asked.

"Of course," Demyx said, never looking up from his sitar. "Oh, wait, the one you asked me to go on today? No."

Steve sighed in exasperation. "When Fish gets back, we are havin' a long conversation about your work ethic!"

With all of the other Overtakers a prisoner of the Master in the Eminence Palace, Steve had been left standing as the sole Overtaker free. Daken, Demyx, and Sarah and Mary Sanderson were the only ones left with him in Villain's Vale. Russell kept Steve updated via cellphone, and, until the situation changed, he was to carry on their work on the outside. Steve may have been a master of media spin, but trying to keep his four allies in line was a chore he was in no way prepared for.

"Where are the others?" Steve asked.

"Huh? Oh, uh, Mary went grocery shopping," Demyx said. "We were out of Cheese-Whiz. I thiiiiiiiink Daken and Sarah are having sex in your office again, but I didn't really care enough to check."

The sound of tiny feet scurrying in the rafters made Steve flinch.

"What was that?" Steve asked.

"We have a raccoon problem," Demyx said with a sigh. "Am I supposed to know everything? Gosh, you're so bossy."

Steve yanked the sitar out of Demyx's hand. "How's this for bossy? Go on that recon mission I told you to go on earlier, or I'm gonna fuckin' throw you in the dungeon with the other Norts."

Demyx got up from the couch and walked away grumbling.

"And when you get back, you can deal with the raccoon problem!" Steve yelled after him.

Steve stomped back to his office (which was thankfully free of Daken and Sarah) and sat down at his desk with a deep sigh.

"Demyx seemed to be in a bad mood," Daken said as he entered the room.

"Daken, I don't have the energy to deal with bullshit," Steve warned. "So if you're not here for a reason-"

"Good news only, fang-face, I promise," Daken said as he hopped up on Steve's desk and crossed his legs. "I have successfully taken complete control of Ratigan's criminal empire. We've got the Radiant Garden underworld under our thumbs."

"Finally some good news," Steve said with a sigh of relief. "I'm running out of content to fearmonger on my show. Maybe we can generate some attack to make the Restoration Committee look bad. I've got them on the ropes, but I'm having trouble landing that critical hit."

"Our big handsome leader has been working so hard, hasn't he?" Daken asked, walking behind Steve and rubbing his shoulders. "I think he needs a distraction to... take the edge off." Daken leaned down and whispered into Steve's ear. "I've never done a vampire before, but I do love a little biting."
Steve could feel Daken's pheromones working on him, and he'd been away from Russell for so long. He wanted what Daken was offering so badly. His fangs popped out on their own, and his pants currently looked like a tent. Still, he shook his head. He knew Daken was manipulating him for power, and he refused to let the other man get that kind of control over him.

"No, no, I can't," Steve said as firmly as he could.

"Russell doesn't have to know," Daken whispered.

"I mean it," Steve said, swatting Daken's hands away. "If you wanna fuck someone, go fuck Sarah or Demyx like you've been doing."

Daken groaned and walked away with a sway to his walk that set Steve's desires on fire.

"Demyx just lies there and puts no effort into anything," Daken complained. "And Sarah's delicious, but sometimes you just need a man to pin down underneath you."

Steve desperately wanted to be pinned down. He wanted a big strong man to just dominate him. However, he refused to be unfaithful to Russell, and Daken was a dangerous bedmate.

"Go!" Steve ordered, desperately trying to hide his fangs from Daken.

"If you insist," Daken said, walking out and doing everything in his power to draw attention to his butt.

Once Daken left the room, Steve dashed over to shut the door and lock it. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He needed Russell and the others back soon. The wolf was at his door, and it wouldn't be long before he was fully in its jaws. As Steve took a moment to relieve his tension, he wished he could say he thought of Russell.

"Let Naminé go, Maleficent!" Roxas ordered.

"Imbeciles!" Maleficent scoffed. "Very soon, your miserable existence will cease to be! You've already lost!"

"I don't think we have, Maleficent," Sora said. "Naminé! Can you hear me? I know she has you under some evil spell, but you're stronger than her. You always have been!"

"Ha! This is priceless," Maleficent cackled.

"Your heart is a part of mine and a part of Roxas's," Sora went on. "We're your friends, and as long as we treasure each other, we'll never be apart! And according to Master Yen Sid, you, me, and Roxas all share a little bit of Ventus's heart too. All four of our hearts stand together as one!"

Maleficent's blood ran cold at that. Her mind drifted back to Volla's prophecy: "The strength of evil is good as none when stands before four hearts as one." Maleficent whipped around and clutched Naminé's shoulders.

"Write these fools out of existence, Naminé!" Maleficent ordered. "DO IT NOW!"

Naminé began to write, and for a moment, Maleficent believed she had won. However, she soon saw for herself exactly what Naminé had written:

Nothing written in this book will ever come to pass save for this:
"NO!" Maleficent screamed in fury.

The book flashed with light, and then a wave of darkness washed over everything. Crimson tentacles began to slither across the walls, only now it was a different scene altogether.

"Leaving so soon?" a deep voice echoed throughout the chamber. "I simply wouldn't hear of it."

A red ball of lightning fell from the ceiling and landed a few feet in front of the Overtakers. From the ball of lightning, a horrific looking creature took form. The beast was all red with black armor decorating his body. He was vaguely humanoid but with massive claws in place of his hands and feet and tentacles protruding from his shoulders and jaws. His eyes were a pair of solid yellow lights glowing with the embers of hatred and death.

"Maleficent, did you really think you could take over all of reality without me?" the beast asked with a bone-chilling laugh.

The tentacles on the wall began to close in on the Overtakers, and the Master cackled again with glee.

"I am your master," the Master replied. "The Overtakers are clearly in need of new leadership, and I nominate myself. Any opposed?"

The tentacles grew what appeared to be dragon skulls at their tips that bared their fangs at the Overtakers. Everyone looked to Maleficent for guidance. The evil fairy merely bowed her head and sighed.

"None oppose you... Master."

Maleficent shot up from her bed gasping for air as if she'd been drowning. Her sleep taunted her with memories of her failures. She led her Overtakers to defeat, and then she led them right into the clutches of the Master. Mistress of All Evil? More like a Mistress of Fools. Her sudden awakening did not rouse Hades on the other side of the bed. She quietly laid her head back down on the pillow. She ordered her mind to put such unfortunate memories aside, but she knew it would not obey.

Chapter End Notes

Cid, Ienzo, and Dilan are from Kingdom Hearts.

Koragg is from Power Rangers: Mystic Force.

The Horned King is from The Black Cauldron.
The Horned King's Corridor of Darkness deposited Loki, Doom, Hook, Cruella, and Russell on the deck of the Jolly Roger, which was hovering in the Etherium just beyond the orbit of The Overtaken Kingdom. Hook was practically swooning at getting to be on the deck of his ship once again after a month of separation. In fact, everyone was in high spirits at getting to leave the castle.

"Ohh fresh air at long last!" Cruella said, stretching her arms out wide. "Hook, darling, PLEASE tell me you have some rum tucked away somewhere."

"I'm offended that you think I wouldn't have any," Hook replied.

Cruella eagerly dashed down below deck to bring up a bottle to share (and by share, of course, Cruella meant to drink entirely by herself and then offer an empty bottle to her comrades to throw away for her).

"So, here's what I'm thinkin'," Russell said. "We set course for Radiant Garden, link back up with Steve, bust the Undertakers outta jail, and then kill those sons of bitches holdin' us down."

"Has a month of confinement impaired your judgment?" Loki asked. "The Master is more powerful than me, and I am a god. What makes you think the expendable lackeys will suffice to turn the tide?"

"They worked against Xehanort!" Russell argued.

"They distracted Xehanort's army long enough for us to finish the job," Loki corrected.

"We should also operate under the assumption that the Master has the ability to track our location," Doom added. "If we make a move to defy him, it must only be at a strategic time when we want him to be aware of our betrayal. At the moment, we are woefully unprepared to oppose him. Therefore, for now, we should simply go along with his wishes."

Russell growled and pouted but did not argue further.

"Yet, it is curious that the Master should send us on this mission," Doom interrupted. "Maleficent, Jafar, and Grimhilde all have prior experience with the Princesses. They would have been the more tactical choices."

"You think that there's something fishy afoot?" Cruella asked, as she emerged from below deck.

"Doubtless," Doom affirmed.

"Grimhilde isn't exactly in the state to leave her bed, let alone go to retrieve a princess," Loki pointed out. "Jafar and Maleficent's absence, however, does give me pause."

"Perhaps he wished to avoid a personal conflict interfering?" Hook suggested.

"Perhaps indeed," Loki said. "But what care he for such things? In any case, there is little use in further questioning. We should proceed with our undertaking."

"Then the question remains," Hook said. "What is our heading?"
"Let's see... the Seven Princess of Heart," Loki began, "There's Kairi, who we faced back on Avalon. From our allies' worlds there are Aurora, Snow White, and Jasmine. Then there's also Alice, Cinderella, and Belle."

"Belle?" Hook asked. "From my world?"

"A different Belle," Loki clarified. "One whose taste in men runs... slightly more beastly. I suppose she'll do as well as any of them. Set course for the Fabled Countryside!"

Demyx was back on the couch again. Steve had no idea where his lazy companion got a new sitar to play, but he'd somehow gotten one. Mary was sitting next to him, flipping channels absent-mindedly.

"Demyx, did you go on the recon mission?" Steve asked, his voice dripping with exasperation.

"Ugh, God, yes, I actually did this time," Demyx whined.

"Then give me a report!" Steve sighed. "What'd you see?"

"It's the Underworld," Demyx said, setting his sitar aside. "What really is there to see? It's exactly the same horrible and miserable place it always has been."

"Well if it's running just like normal, someone's gotta be in charge down there," Steve reasoned. "Is Hecate in power? Did you see her down there?"

"No, I didn't," Demyx replied. "What makes you think anyone is in power down there? Hades always said that the Underworld basically ran itself."

"I'm no expert on running lands of the dead," Steve said, "but I think Hades was just being modest. Besides, Hecate's wanted Hades's job for centuries. Why wouldn't she have taken over with him being M.I.A.?"

"Do I look like a psychic to you?" Demyx asked. "How should I know?"

"Never mind," Steve sighed. "Thank you, Demyx."

"Want me to go poke around?" Daken asked as he strolled into the room. "I've always wanted to say hi to some of the dead souls I sent down there."

"Yeah, no," Steve said. "The last thing I need is you installing yourself as the new Lord of Dead after you fuck whoever's running things down there."

"You know me so well," Daken said with a smirk.

"None of us are powerful enough to play on this level of gods and octopus monsters," Steve continued. "And the only Undertaker locked up right now who could is the Evil Manta. We need a new edge, otherwise we're just gonna become a group of common thugs and Octomus is never gonna let our friends go."

Mary looked like she was about to say something, but then recoiled.

"What is it Mary?" Steve asked.

"Oh, it's probably something foolish," Mary said. "I never have good ideas. Just ignore me."

"Mary," Steve urged. "Tell me."
"Well, it's just that in my experience, based solely on things that I have seen and not as a hard rule of thumb, most witches keep a stock of magical artifacts for a rainy day," Mary explained. "Might, uh... might Maleficent have something?"

Steve's eyes widened. "Mary, you're a GENIUS!"

"I am?" the witch asked.

"Maleficent's vault is full of powerful stuff that Mozenrath tried to steal!" Steve explained. "There's gotta be somethin' in there that can help us!"

Steve dashed down to the Vault, and the other Overtakers followed at their own pace. The vault was sealed up with a protection spell, but Steve found that it opened for him without having to force it. Steve realized that Maleficent must've left it available to all Overtakers.

"Let's see what we've got here," Steve said as he stepped into the vault.

Steve ran his fingers over the various shelves and admired the various antiques decorating the room. They all looked like something that his father would write off as "devil stuff." Steve admired the designs of the knick-knacks, but that was all that he could admire.

"Umm... I have no idea what any of this stuff does," Steve admitted.

"Our leader, ladies and gentlemen," Daken quipped.

Sarah and Mary ran into the room and immediately started to look around. Being witches, they knew more about occult artifacts than anyone else present.

"What a pretty potion!" Sarah declared, plucking a beautiful green glass vial off the shelf.

"What does it do?" Steve asked, looking at it. "Does it make you an invincible super soldier?"

Sarah uncorked the potion, sniffed it, and then chugged the entire bottle.

"It was rat urine," she giggled.

Steve scrunched up his face in disgust. "Why would she keep a bottle of rat urine in here?"

"When aged well, it's a useful catalyst for a lot of potions," Mary answered, never looking away from the shelf she was examining.

"Oh yes, this was such an excellent use of our time," Daken replied. "A cellar filled with urine samples. Game changing. Truly."

"Wait! Wait!" Mary said. "I got something! Look!"

Mary held up a single dragon tooth up triumphantly.

"A tooth?" Demyx asked. "First rat piss and now just a tooth. I'm starting to thing Maleficent was just as batty as old Xehanort."

"No, wait a minute, I remember some myth about dragon teeth," Steve said. "Somethin' about plantin' them in soil."

"That sounds fake," Demyx replied.
"No, he's right," Mary said. "If thou shouldst plant a dragon tooth in soil, it shall sprout a warrior fully formed. But if thou shouldst plant the tooth whilst holding it, thou shalt become the most powerful evil version of thyself!"

Steve took the tooth and rubbed his fingers over the onyx enamel. It was practically unfathomable to think that all of that power was just lying inside of a single tooth. Steve pocketed the tooth and turned back to Mary.

"What else have we got in here?" Steve asked.

"Ooh, look! Look!" Sarah said, bouncing over to another shelf supporting what appeared to be another large ornate tube of green.

"If that's more urine, I'm not interested," Steve groaned.

"No, that's something very powerful!" Mary said, her eyes widening. "That's a reliquary! Behold! T'is a container for a soul!"

Sarah shook the reliquary up next to her ear and grinned. "Got one!"

Steve looked over the magical artifact. It was tall and cylindrical with an iron skull corking the top. Inside the glass container was a green wisp of energy that Steve could hear had a faint pulse.

"D'ya think that soul will help us?" Steve asked.

"Maleficent wouldn't keep him down here if he wasn't powerful," Mary said.

"Yes, I got that part," Steve said. "But last time somebody in this vault got out, a giant owl tried to kill everyone."

"It's too dangerous to release someone we don't know without precautions in place," Daken chimed in. "At least the four of you are the morons I know. Whoever's in there could be worse than that octo-beast giving our other allies so much trouble."

Steve squinted his eyes at Daken, trying to figure out the other man's play. Was Daken banking on being able to manipulate everyone present and feared an unknown variable? Or was Daken counting on Steve to do the opposite of whatever he suggested? The again, Daken could be genuinely concerned and mean what he said. It was never clear with him. Though Daken hid behind the mask of a being a shallow sexual fantasy, Steve knew that Daken was actually a brilliant and devious chess master who could put an opponent in checkmate before they'd even see the board.

On the other hand, Steve wouldn't even have to worry about Daken anymore if Russell was here, and there was nothing Steve wanted right now more than to have Russell back in his arms. They still weren't any closer to freeing Russell and the others from the Master's influence. If freeing this soul could get them closer to that goal, then it was all worth it. And if it wouldn't, then did anything even really matter any more? There was a high risk, but also a tantalizing reward if everything played out.

"Nothin' ventured, nothin' gained," Steve decided. "Let's let him out."

One of the bodies that had been unearthed to form a new Cauldron Born was laid out in the courtyard of Villain's Vale with the reliquary resting in its hands. According to Mary, the soul within the reliquary could inhabit the corpse and mold it into the image of the body it once inhabited. Steve didn't know much about witchcraft or necromancy, but he knew the Sanderson Sisters trafficked in Satanic magic drawing power from all
things unholy and dark.

Steve didn't fully know where he stood religiously any more. He'd been an Evangelical Christian minister up until the day he was turned vampire. Then he thought he'd found the true faith in the form of Lilith and Her word. Now, he consorted with Pagan gods, and dark sorcerers who seemed capable of bending the world around them. Suffice to say, he saw that the old Shakespearean phrase was right: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Yet, despite this, the dark magic that the witches were performing disgusted him on a subconscious level.

Steve shook that revulsion from his thoughts. He'd seen the eternal final resting place meant for him in the Underworld, and it was nothing like the Christian Heaven or Hell. He knew logically that magic was just a tool like anything else. Still, his father's memory nagged at his soul. He could practically hear the old man lecturing him about having become everything wrong with the world. Steve was a gay vampire working with witches and "false gods." The only way he could've been a bigger disappointment to his dad would be if he somehow turned into anything other than white.

Steve couldn't honestly say that he believed that what he was doing was "good" anymore, but that didn't make his dad right about any of it. Good and bad were base human concepts preached to keep people in line under an authority. Steve was beyond that now. Russell and Maleficent helped him to see that the true divide of the universe was between vision and complacency. Steve was a man of vision, and thus he would make his mark on the course of history. That was all that really mattered.

"Întoarcere de la moarte, maestru al mormântului," Mary and Sarah chanted whilst dancing around the corpse.

Green wisps of smoke poured out of the reliquary and coated the corpse with its magic. Green and black energy blurred the features of the corpse as it levitated and tilted upright. When the light cleared, the figure left standing before them hardly looked to be in better shape than a corpse. The man standing before them had leathery skin, crooked yellow teeth, black hair slicked back into a ponytail, and a long black beard than hung down to his waist. His eyes had a mad intensity to them, and his attire was that of a monk's robe. The man gasped for air as he regained consciousness.

"It wooooorked," Mary said in a sing-song voice, to which Sarah applauded vigorously.

"Who dares to summon the great Rasputin?" the man bellowed.

"Rasputin?" Steve asked. "You're Rasputin? As in that crazy Russian mystic who wouldn't die? See, I'd always guessed that he was actually a vampire, and that would account for all those weird stories about him."

"I've encountered a certain steel plated descendant of his on the X-Men. Incidentally, that guy's so far in the closet, he's finding Narnia," Daken said.

"What are you two babbling about?" Rasputin growled.

"Sorry, guess there are different versions of you who're kinda famous on more than one world," Steve said. "My name is Steve Newlin. I am the de facto leader of the Overtakers in Maleficent's absence."

"Maleficent, eh?" Rasputin said. "That evil fairy promised me the power to destroy the Romanovs, yet her great 'gift' came with great vulnerability. A soul bought with the shattering of glass... Thanks to that Romanov brat Anastasia... Oh, I swear I will tear her to PIECES!"
"Pretty sure she got shot in the head back on my world," Daken quipped.

That seemed to get Rasputin smiling, showing off his putrid teeth.

"Anyways," Steve said. "I have ordered your release from the reliquary because I am in need of your mystical expertise. Cooperate with me, and you'll receive a share of the grand spoils of a universe bent to our design."

"You ordered?" Rasputin asked. "Heh, you are little more than a lapdog of Maleficent. I will negotiate only with the evil fairy herse-"

Steve sped towards Rasputin and grabbed the mad monk by the throat. This was really more of a Russell move, but Steve figured that if he was to keep control, he'd have to learn from the best. He stared deep into Rasputin's wild eyes with his glamour powers hissing in Rasputin's ears.

"You're gonna be a cooperative member of my team," Steve said. "Am I clear?"

"Yes," Rasputin nodded.

Steve released his grip and straightened his jacket. "Now then, Rasputin. My allies are bein' held captive by the power of a being known as the Master. Other names include Octomus or Absolute."

"Absolute God N Ma," Rasputin finished. "Yes, I know this being well. An ancient primordial entity of darkness with an insatiable thirst for light magic. My tomes of dark magic spoke of him only in the most exalted and fearful terms."

"Well, I'm gonna need you to devise some way to destroy or defeat him," Steve said.

Rasputin's toothy grin widened at that prospect. "Ohoho, that is truly a challenge worthy of my talents. Rasputin, Tamer of Gods. Has a nice ring to it! I think I'll quite enjoy showing the Master who is the true power in the dark of the night!"

Chapter End Notes

Rasputin is the version seen in 1997 animated Anastasia film.
Hades stepped out of Maleficent's room to find Jafar, Ursula, Fish, Blackheart, and Pete standing outside waiting for him to emerge.

"She's not ready," Hades said. "So this lil' cavalry here needs to back itself up and give her space."

"She's had MORE than enough space," Jafar growled. "She is the leader of this team, and I demand to see her at once!"

Hades's fires flared up. "You wanna try that again, Jaffy?"

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" Blackheart chanted with a devilish grin on his face.

"Shut up, Blackheart," Fish said as she positioned herself in between Hades and Jafar. "In-fighting gets us nowhere. And if we make too much noise, Koragg is going to be on us before we can do anything."

"I just wanna know if Maleficent's okay," Pete said.

"None of us are okay, Pete!" Ursula replied. "We're all under the control of a horrific demon we know nothing about, and our leader has abandoned us."

"Ursie, you should really know better," Hades warned. "I told ya, Malef's NOT ready, and all of you need to back the Hell off!"

"Hades, I know you're trying to think about what's best for her," Fish said. "But we're in dire straights right now, and the team's betterment has to come first."

"All of you are pathetic," Blackheart said. "We don't even need Maleficent if she's gonna be that way. I can take on the Master myself and shove those tentacles down his fucking throat."

"If you actually believe that, you're more of a fool than I took you for," Jafar said. "He'll drain your magic and slay you before you even get the opportunity to land a single hit!"

"ENOUGH!"

A hush fell over the Overtakers as Maleficent exited her room and approached them.

"I thought I made myself plain to all of you," Maleficent said. "We cannot defeat the Master, and thus there is little point in scrambling about trying to decide what to do. We serve him to the best of our abilities. That is the sole purpose of our Overtakers now."

Maleficent turned to back to return to her chambers.

"How dare you?!"

Maleficent whirled around in fury to see who had spoken. It wasn't Jafar or Blackheart who had challenged her. Ursula stood with her hands on her hips and a defiant look in her eyes. Fish even seemed to be taken back by her girlfriend's boldness. Ursula had always been one of Maleficent's closest friends and allies. For her to defy Maleficent was practically unthinkable.
"You dare to speak against me?" Maleficent asked, more taken aback than angry.

"Yes, I do," Ursula said. "So the Book of Prophecies didn't work out? Tough tuna! We came together to rule the worlds. We are the Overtakers. When Xehanort tried to deny us our power, we stuck that old coot ten feet under. But now that some old beast has us cornered, you wanna just give up? That's not what we do! You call yourself the Mistress of All Evil? Well, start acting like it!"

Maleficent and Ursula locked eyes, and it was clear that Ursula wasn't going to let up. Both Fish and Hades feared that they would have to pry their girlfriends away from each other. Finally, though, Maleficent relented.

"All of you, come," Maleficent ordered. "Come into my chambers where we will not be overheard."

Loki, Doom, Russell, Cruella, and Hook arrived at the Fabled Countryside, the home world of Belle. The five Overtakers gathered on a hilltop covered in snow overlooking a quiet village.

"Oh this cold is MISERABLE!" Cruella growled. "If I'd have known we were going to be stuck in some wintery wonderland, I'd have grabbed two more puppies and made mittens."

"I thought we were to liberate a maiden locked away in a castle," Hook said. "That down there looks to be peaceful hamlet. A far cry from what was described."

"The castle is on the other side of the forest," Loki explained. "This little town is the peaceful village that Belle once called home."

"Then why are we not on the other side of the woods?" Hook asked with a sigh. "I've as great a love of hiking as any, but it seems a bit counterproductive."

"How do you think I knew all about Belle and this world?" Loki asked.

"Can we skip the part where you act like we're a bunch of morons and cut right to the part where you explain everything?" Russell asked. "You and Doom BOTH do this EVERY time."

"Very well," Loki said. "I have been subtly prying into our dear Koragg's mind for weeks now."

"Oh fuck you, the rest of us here aren't even psychic," Russell said with a sigh. "How were we supposed to even guess that? You asked a fucking question that we couldn't even answer without lookin' stupid."

"Let him finish," Doom growled.

"Back when our Koragg was a servant of Xehanort," Loki continued, "he was sent to this world and attempted to seize Belle. However, he failed miserably. He attempted to drive a wedge between Belle and her beast from the inside. We need a different strategy that they will not be as resilient against. Hence why I have brought us here to Belle's home and the home of those she knows and cares for. We can draw her out into our trap."

"Exactly HOW, o' omniscient one?" Russell asked.

"I leave the three of you to figure that out," Loki said with a sinister grin. "Come now, I've gotten you started. It should be effortless. You are all three Overtakers. It is time to prove your worth."

"And where the FUCK are you and Doom goin'?" Russell asked. "You're the ones who advised us against goin' off course."
"Doom and I shall be going to the world of another Princess of Heart," Loki explained. "It will not be off course, and it will not take long. If successful, we may just have a key to destroying the Master."

"Then why on Earth are we even going after Belle in the first place?" Cruella asked.

"Recall earlier how I suspected something amiss with this roster?" Doom asked. "That the Master may have set us up for a rather unfortunate end?"

Cruella, Hook, and Russell all nodded cautiously.

Loki grinned devilishly. "You three are the canaries in the coal mine."

Loki cackled wickedly as he swept himself and Doom up in a Corridor of Darkness, leaving the three other Overtakers standing shocked and furious in the snow. Russell immediately started to angrily kick the snow where Loki and Doom had just been.

"Fuck, shit, motherfuckin' assholes!" Russell cursed.

"VERY bad form!" Hook spat, gesturing angrily at the sky with his hook.

"Come along, darlings," Cruella sighed, as she started to head towards the town. "They're bound to have a pub somewhere. Maybe things'll look better after a drink or ten."

Merlin peered past the curtains, looking out the window at the crowd gathered in front of his house. The old wizard huffed angrily.

"One big mindless mess!" Merlin barked as he closed the curtains. "That Steve Newlin fellow has practically turned the whole town against us."

"Bunch o' ungrateful pricks," Cid agreed, never looking up from his computer.

"The people are just scared and upset," Aerith said. "We haven't exactly made the best progress putting together government operations."

"Infrastructure is more important," Leon said. "I'd rather make sure everyone has clean water and houses than politicians lying to their faces."

"Be that as it may, it's becoming quite apparent that many do not see it that way," Merlin said. "Why, if history's any indication, next thing you know, they'll be dumping tea into the harbor dressed as Native Americans."

"Tea? The harbor?" Yuffie asked, scratching her head.

"Yes, well, it was an act of civil disobedience in response to high taxation without representation," Merlin explained. "It was one of many events that led to the American revolution against Great Britain."

"Fascinatin'," Cid huffed.

"What world was that on again?" Aerith asked, trying to be polite.

"Ah, well, let's see, um, I believe it was Boston," Merlin said. "No, no, that was the city. New England? No, perhaps it was... Oh never mind! Something in the future of some world or the past of another. I can't remember."
"Hey! Look!" Yuffie called out, pointing out the window. "Steve Newlin just showed up!"

Sure enough, outside of the Restoration Committee headquarters, the protesting crowd parted to allow Steve and Daken to come through. Steve hopped up onto a wooden crate and looked out at the crowd, which had begun chanting his name.

"Would ya look at this crowd!" Steve said, projecting his voice as much as possible. "I see before me a crowd of brave, informed citizens who are standing up for their rights! And I'm so proud to count myself amongst y'all today. We are sending a clear message to the Restoration Committee that they cannot continue to rule over us as dictators! They cannot continue to make decisions for us. That's not how this works!"

Cheers of affirmation echoed through the crowd. Steve couldn't help but beam with pride. He'd accomplished so much with just network television time and a well written script.

"We want accountability!" Steve shouted, earning more cheers. "Transparency!" Cheers. "Civil liberties!" Even more cheering. "Because let me tell you: things are only gonna get worse from here unless we stand up and say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!"

"ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!" the crowd parroted. "ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!"

The chanting was silenced by the sound of gunshots.

A ten-foot tall mechanical body with gatling guns in place of its "arms" stomped into the town square. Professor Ratigan cackled with fiendish glee from the control panel where the "head" should have been. His henchmen had been working tirelessly for weeks to reverse-engineer Mr. Flaversham's mechanical toy technology on a larger scale. Now it was finally ready.

"You fools want rights?" Ratigan bellowed into the mech suit's megaphone. "YOU HAVE NO RIGHTS! Your city belongs to ME!"

Ratigan fired on the crowd, causing everyone to scatter and scream. Steve hit the deck as soon as the firing started. He knew Daken was going to create a incident to generate media attention, but he had no idea that this was what Daken had in mind. Daken rushed into action, claws drawn, running towards the villain to defeat. Steve rolled his eyes at Daken's need to fight for his glory, but then Steve noticed a stray bullet that had landed nearby. Steve's blood ran cold when he realized that the bullet wasn't metal; it was wooden. One stray bullet could have killed Steve. There was no way Ratigan knew that by himself.

By the time Leon, Yuffie, and the rest of the Restoration Committee leaped into action, Daken had already sliced the mech suit into scrap metal. Ratigan attempted to scurry off once he realized he'd been beaten, but Daken grabbed the criminal mastermind by the cape.

"Professor Ratigan, I presume?" Daken said. "Well aren't you a cutie?"

Ratigan was thrown into a spare birdcage that Merlin had lying around and was hauled off to the Super-Max Prison. Steve and Daken watched with the crowd as the Restoration Committee took him away.

"Well that'll give you something exciting to talk about on your next show," Daken said with a smug grin.

Steve grabbed Daken's arm and pulled the other man in close and whispered so that only the two of them would hear. "You equipped him with wooden bullets. One wrong move, and I could've met the
"true death."

"Then I'm glad you didn't have a wrong move," Daken replied, his smile never fading.

"You try to pull that bullshit on me again, you're gettin' locked up with the Norts," Steve warned as he released Daken and stomped away.

"You can reach the top in an instant," Daken said to himself as he watched Steve. "You can burn and kill and lie your way there overnight. But to stay... to become something more than a puppet king... you have to build a foundation."

Building a foundation was exactly what Daken had in mind when he called the various gang leaders of Radiant Garden to a private summit at Mooney's. Ratigan's three underbosses had once been constantly at war with themselves. Ratigan's resourcefulness united them into a single crime family, but the winds were changing. Peace was an altogether foreign concept to these characters.

Gathered around the table were a blonde pixie sporting frilly magenta and white clothes, a spectacle-wearing man with a mechanical prosthetic arm and leg, and an anthropomorphic weasel clad in a slick pink suit and fedora. Daken poured four glasses of scotch with a single graceful movement. He then slid the glasses one by one to the underbosses.

"Leblanc, leader of the Leblanc Syndicate," Daken said as he passed the glass to the pink-wearing pixie.

"Nooj, leader of the Youth League." The glass slid to the bespectacled man's mechanical hand.

"Smarty, leader of the Toon Patrol." The third glass made its way to the weasel.

Daken lifted the fourth glass up. "To good fortune! Where I'm from, we say 'Kampai'!"

"Kampai!" the three underbosses echoed.

All four gulped down their drinks. Smarty slammed his empty glass against the table with a clang.

"Let's cut to the chase here, Mr. Mohawkican," Smarty said as he lit a cigarette. "Youse all saws the Professor get rolled off to the hooch-cow."

"I think you mean hoosegow," Leblanc corrected. "A hooch-cow would probably be way more fun. This moron can't even get slang right."

Smarty wasted no time pulling out a pistol and threatening Leblanc with it. "Watch your tongue, toots! The Professor ain't around no more to keep me from clippin' those fairy wings of yours."

"Are you two really that petty?" Nooj asked. "We just saw our Don get used as a pawn in Newlin and the Restoration Committee's petty game. The time for squabbling is done. We need to tear down the systems now."

"Oh, you're so right, Nooj," Leblanc said, her entire tone shifting from fearsome to utterly smitten. "All of that stuff is so important to me too! You're just absolutely the type of man that Radiant Garden needs."

Smarty made a gagging noise. "Ya makin' me lose my lunch over here! We's gotta figure out how territorials are gettin' divided."

"All in good time, my friends," Daken said. "But before the future is ours to craft, we must first
regroup and gather our strength. Just because Ratigan is out of the picture doesn't mean that his vision of a unified Radiant Garden mob has to be."

"Some of us here can barely stand the sight, not to mention the smell of some of the others," Leblanc said, giving side-eye to Smarty. "Why should we stick together?"

"Indeed," Nooj agreed. "The Youth League isn't some street gang. We're a political movement, fighting against the oppression of government, media, and big business."

"Key word being 'fighting' from what I've heard," Daken replied with a grin. "We don't have to talk about it, though. First rule of Fight Club, right? Friends, we need each other. Leblanc's network of thieves, fences, and smugglers. Nooj's hot-blooded boys who need their rage pointed towards a productive end. Smarty's raw weasel-power and experienced collection of hitmen. And, of course, my leadership."

"*Your* leadership?" Leblanc asked.

"No way in Hell!" Smarty spat.

"You're an agent of Maleficent," Nooj said. "Though you've been a true ally to all of us, to follow you would be to tether ourselves to the Overtakers."

Daken simply reached into his jacket pocket and threw three polaroid photos onto the table. The three underbosses each cautiously took the one that landed in front of them. They all collectively gasped.

"I've been siphoning off control of your criminal organizations for the past month, right under your noses," Daken explained. "And, as you can see, I've taken out insurance policies against all of you. I'd rather take control with three loyal underbosses to divide the workload with, but I'm willing to make some deep cuts if need be."

To punctuate his meaning, Daken extended his claws.

"Then there's only one thing left to say," Nooj said, drawing a pistol. "Go to Hell!"

Nooj quickly fired three rounds directly into Daken's chest. Daken fell backwards into a puddle of blood and lied still. Nooj, Leblanc, and Smarty all got up from the table and began to walk towards the exit, figuring that the dead body was Mooney's problem, not theirs.

However, Nooj stopped short when he felt a sharp pain shoot through him. He looked down to see Daken's claws protruding out from his chest. Smarty and Leblanc looked on in mild horror as Daken tossed Nooj's lifeless body aside, his claws still dripping red.

"When you kill someone, make sure he's dead," Daken said with a grin. "Let that be a lesson to the two of you."

"Uh, you got it... umm... *boss*," Smarty said, holding up his hands so that Daken wouldn't misunderstand any of his movements.

"Nooj was pretty cute, but you're kind of cuter," Leblanc said. "Hail to the new Professor."

Daken smirked. "Professor? Not my style. You can call me..."

Daken's mind drifted back to his father, and the legacy of bloodshed left in his father's wake. That legacy was a part of Daken, and it always would be. No sense running from the throne you were
destined to take.

"... The *Dark* Wolverine."

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Steve Newlin stared at the pot of soil sitting on his desk. He knew quite well what he had to do. He'd been left in charge of the Overtakers, Daken was gunning for him, and one wrong move would have killed him earlier. As much as he wanted Russell and his friends back, Steve knew that his first priority had to be surviving until that happened. Steve glanced at the dragon's tooth in his hand.

"*If thou shouldst plant the tooth whilst holding it, thou shalt become the most powerful evil version of thyself?*"

Steve didn't fully know what that would mean for him. He didn't know if he'd still be himself or if it would make him someone entirely different. He didn't have time to care. Steve needed the power now or his days were number.

Steve took a deep breath, clutched the tooth, and plunged his fist into the soil.

Chapter End Notes

The Fabled Countryside was a rumored/translated name for the Beauty and the Beast world before it was announced as Beast's Castle. I think it's a great name and better for the entire world, so I've kept it here.

Leblanc, Nooj, and Smarty are all Kingdom Hearts versions of characters who originally appeared in Final Fantasy X-2 and Who Framed Roger Rabbit, respectively.
Long Ago...

Though the Pit was known to the inhabitants of its world as "the Underworld," it was not the same realm that Hades called home. The Pit was no mere land of the dead; it was a breeding ground for the Morlocks, the Forces of Darkness. Hidiacs and Styxoids, undead and unnatural foot soldiers, littered the landscape and gathered along the cavern walls of the darkly lit throne room. A great war table was set up in front of a bright white hole in the center of the room.

General Morticon, leader of the Morlocks, stood around the table with his lieutenants: Necrolai the Vampire Queen, Alegaera the Vengeance Wreaker, and Majesterian the Warlock. A map of the Mystic Forests was laid out in front of them with metal figures representing the opposite sides of the war meticulously placed.

"MY ARMY CONTINUES TO CONQUER THE FOREST TRIBES!" Morticon boasted in his loud, gravelly voice. "SOON WE WILL BE IN POSITION TO STRIKE AT THE HUMAN WORLD, AND THERE WILL BE NOTHING THE MYSTIC FORCE CAN DO ABOUT IT!"

"I'm looking forward to punishing the humans," Alegaera hissed eagerly. "But what of the reports that The Light has been born?"

Morticon huffed angrily. "AN INFANT CANNOT STOP MY FORCES! I LEAVE OUR SPY IN THE MYSTIC FORCE TO WORRY ABOUT THE BABY."

"Calindor will not disappoint us," Necrolai agreed with a cackle. "It seems, Majesterian, that we may soon have a new Dark Wizard of the Underworld. How does it feel being last year's model?"

"Hmph!" Majesterian scoffed. "Calindor is an imperious snake! His sorcery is NOTHING compared to mine!"

"Then I weep for his power," a woman's voice said, causing the four lieutenants to turn to face the entrance of the Pit. Maleficent stood in the doorway, her face haughty. "Your power failed to produce an adequate defense spell to keep me out!"

Morticon drew his sword. "GIVE ME ONE GOOD REASON I SHOULDN'T SLIT YOUR THROAT FOR INTRUDING!"

"It is not you who I seek," Maleficent said. "I come to meet your Master."

"HA! AN INSECT LIKE YOU SEEKS THE MASTER?" Morticon asked.

"Do NOT underestimate me," Maleficent warned. "Your Master is known throughout many worlds, as am I. Neither of our powers can be denied. I have my eyes on a grand conquest, and I believe that he and I are natural allies to take control of Kingdom Hearts itself and rule all the worlds!"

"Is it possible for the forces of the damned to seize the heart of life?" Majesterian wondered out loud.
"It's a tempting treat," Necrolai said with a cackle.

"A TEMPTING TREAT WE HAVE LITTLE NEED FOR!" Morticon bellowed. "WE WILL CONQUER ALL WORLDS BY THE STRENGTH OF MY ARMY!"

"But would you deny your Master the chance to hear my offer?" Maleficent asked.

At that, Morticon went silent and huffed. He turned back around and plopped down onto his throne.

"VERY WELL," Morticon said. "YOU MAY ENTER THE MASTER'S PORTAL. BUT KNOW THAT HE MAY EAT YOU FOR YOUR INSOLENCE IF YOUR OFFER DOES NOT SUIT HIS FANCY."

Maleficent nodded and stepped onto the glowing white circle in the center of the chamber. The evil fairy vanished into a flash of light and reappeared in an immense chamber with a single cobblestone wall visible at Maleficent's back. In all other directions, all she could see was darkness. The sound of something slithering in the shadows kept Maleficent on her toes. She saw the tentacles before she saw their master.

"Well, well, well, one must be either very brave or very foolish to come down into my nest," the Master said as he stepped into view, revealing his grotesque appearance.

"I am Maleficent, Mistress of All Evil!" she boasted, never allowing a twinge of fear to crack into her words. "I come to your world in search of allies for a gathering I am putting together. I was most impressed by the tales of your power, and the war raging in the Mystic Forests has certainly validated your reputation."

"A war is just a war," the Master replied. "Morticon deserves more credit than I for its carnage. Once he conquered the Mystic Forests, then my power will truly be seen, and the feasting will begin!"

Maleficent sneered. She'd expected the Master to be a regal figure desiring the conquest of the worlds. All she saw before her was a beast acting on base instinct. Still, his power and resources were unquestionable, and Maleficent needed allies now that her friend Xehanort had almost certainly perished at the Keyblade Graveyard.

"Nevertheless, we both seek the spread of darkness throughout all the worlds," Maleficent said. "The secret to obtaining the heart of all that lives has been revealed to me. There are seven maidens whose hearts are pure of light who hold the power to open the door when gathered together. I already have one within my grasp. Once I've obtained the other six, every world will be mine for taking."

"Just yours?" the Master asked with a chuckle.

"I intend to share the spoils with those who join me," Maleficent explained. "I do not seek control or servitude from you, merely an alliance. You cannot tell me that you are not tempted by the power promised by Kingdom Hearts."

The Master licked his lips and waved his tentacles around thoughtfully. "Perhaps that is a treat that wets my appetite. But I will require a gesture of... good faith."

He spoke the phrase as if both words were foreign to his tongue.

"Of course," Maleficent nodded. "Have you heard of the Heartless?"

Maleficent added the force of her Heartless to Morticon's army. Though Leanbow and the Mystic
Force fought well, it was clear that their days were numbered. Soon the Mystic Forests would be conquered, and then Maleficent and the Master could turn their attention towards other worlds. Or, at least, that was what they expected. The Mystic Force made a daring final play at the Gates of the Underworld that no one could have anticipated. The Mystic Force defeated and destroyed Alegaera and Majesterian, and they'd pushed the Master's armies back into the Underworld. Maleficent looked on from a nearby tower at the scene unfolding at the gates. Two young women looked on as Leanbow, the Red Mystic Warrior, ran through the gates as they began to shut. One of them, known as Niella the Gatekeeper, dashed after him.

"STAY BACK!" Leanbow cried out. "Seal the gate with a spell! It is the only way!"

The immense gates slammed shut. Niella raised her staff above her head and her silver diadem began to glow a bright shade of purple. The energy radiated off the staff and swept over the gates. Niella cried out in agony as the spell sealed the Morlocks in the Pit, unable to return to the surface world. The strain of the spell caused Niella to pass out, and when her sister rushed to her aide, she found that Niella's body had dissolved, her lifeforce spent.

Maleficent sneered in frustration. Her first true allies in the war against the light had just been sealed behind a powerful mystic gate. Yet, Maleficent couldn't say that she wasn't a bit relieved. The Master was a beast through and through, and with his great dark powers, he could've made considerable trouble for her once Kingdom Hearts was within her grasp. The evil fairy decided then and there that she would not weep this defeat and that she would simply seek out more trustworthy allies.

"MALEFICENT!" the voice of the Master bellowed in her mind.

"Master?" Maleficent asked. "You are alive?"

"Yes," the Master growled. "But the Gatekeeper's spell has trapped me, Morticon, and Necrolai in the Pit! I cannot even use a Corridor of Darkness to escape!"

"How unfortunate," Maleficent said in mock sympathy.

"You must free me!" the Master said. "You are my one living servant still on the outside."

"Servant?" Maleficent asked with a gasp. "I serve no one!"

"Do not argue semantics with me, woman!" the Master roared. "Free me, NOW!"

Maleficent knew that the Master's slip of the tongue was not merely semantics. He saw her as a minion and nothing more. Any doubts Maleficent had about leaving the Master to rot quickly left her mind.

"I think not," Maleficent replied.

The Master roared after her, but Maleficent paid him no further mind. She disappeared into a Corridor of Darkness and never looked back.

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*Today...*

"Well apparently he *did* manage to escape the gates," Blackheart said once Maleficent finished relaying her story. "Guess self-sacrifices aren't as potent as they used to be."

Blackheart, Hades, Ursula, Fish Mooney, Jafar, and Pete were all gathered in Maleficent's chambers to watch the visions of the past play out in front of them. The threat of the Master weighed heavily
on everyone's mind.

"Only after a great deal of effort by his disciples," Maleficent clarified. "However, I was under the impression that the Mystic Force slew him permanently after he was set free. It appears he has found some way to return to the living plane."

"Most of us here know how that goes," Ursula said. "Death is cheap when you know how to work the darkness."

"Let's go back to that 'sealed behind a gate' thing," Hades chimed in. "If it happened once, hey, it can happen again. Zeusy had a pretty tight lock on the Titans, after all. Stick that on the master and badda-bing."

"A lock that even you were able to break," Jafar pointed out. "We'd need something much more powerful than that for the Master."

"Now wait a sec!" Pete spoke up. "Dat pipsqueak with the Keyblade can unlock or seal up just 'bout anything! Maybe he can put the Master under lock 'n key!"

"Such an attempt may indeed spell our destruction," Maleficent warned. "Are you prepared to lay down your lives in defiance towards the Master?"

"A life of subjugation is no life worth living," Fish said. "I'd rather die fighting for my freedom."

Murmurs of affirmation rippled amongst the gathered Overtakers. Maleficent had to admit that she was taken off guard by their resolve, but she knew she'd chosen her Overtakers well. The Master did not deserve their allegiance, and he would not have it.

"Then first things first," Maleficent said. "We will need to escape this world."

Rasputin's reliquary surged with energy. Green smoke swirled vibrantly around the room as the curse took shape.

"YES! YES!" Rasputin exclaimed with a cackle.

However, the promising curse quickly sputtered out, and the reliquary sat dormant on the table. Rasputin broke out into a series of incomprehensible screams and growls in his frustration, and he tore the page of the spell book to shreds.

"Looks like somebody's a grumpy boy," Daken said as he walked in on Rasputin's tantrum.

"YOU DARE INTRUDE UPON MY WORK?" Rasputin shouted, turning on Daken.

"Have you seen Steve?" Daken asked. "I think he took a little... joke of mine too seriously. You'd think he'd never had wooden bullets shot at him before."

"You are insufferable," Rasputin said. "I am trying to work!"

"The Master problem?" Daken asked, examining the reliquary.

"Obviously," Rasputin huffed. "But the dark forces I have conjured do not seem to have the strength to combat such power."

"Sounds like you need something like a darkness battery," Daken suggested. "Do they sell those at wizarding specialty shops or do you have to custom order?"
"You speak utter nonsense!" Rasputin growled. "GET OUT!"

"Fine," Daken said in mock offense. "If you're going to be a bossy bottom, then I don't think I'm interested any more."

Daken strolled out of Rasputin's laboratory (well... technically it was Doctor Doom's laboratory). Even with Rasputin's rotten stench, it was obvious by scent alone that Steve hadn't been there recently. Daken encountered a strange scent in Steve's office earlier that day, and he had to admit that his curiosity was piqued.

"Strike out with Rasputin?" Demyx asked.

Daken glanced over to the couch where Demyx was reclining with a half eaten bag of potato chips.

"I'm beginning to think that I'm completely misunderstood," Daken said, insincerity hanging on every word.

"I understand that you're a total perv," Demyx said as he loudly crunched a potato chip.

Daken plopped down on the couch and scooted closer to Demyx suggestively. Demyx couldn't help but recoil a bit. Daken reached towards Demyx's lap, causing the younger man to twitch a bit in anticipation. Demyx's heart rate calmed when Daken simply reached into the bag on his lap and pulled out a chip to eat.

"You seem tense, sweetie," Daken said as he snapped the chip in two with his teeth. "Big bad Newlin working you too hard?"

"Naw, he hasn't made me do anything since the recon mission," Demyx replied. "It's just... I thought I saw something kinda freaky in the shadows earlier."

"Was Mary topless again?" Daken asked, pulling another chip out of the bag.

"I'm being serious, okay?" Demyx whined. "It was like... I dunno, like a bat."

Daken smirked at that. "Ooh, a big scary bat. Maybe it's even..."

Daken suddenly grabbed Demyx's shoulders and shook the other man. "A vampire bat!"

"Not funny," Demyx said as he got up from the couch (the first time Daken had seen Demyx get off of the couch all day). "You're such an asshole."

"At least assholes turn me on," Daken joked with a shrug.

Demyx stormed out, leaving Daken behind on the couch. Daken nibbled on the edges of a chip, whittling it down into the silhouette of a bat.

"Oh Stevie, Stevie, Stevie," Daken mused. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

Russell, Hook, and Cruella made their way to the town pub, a warmly lit wooden respite from the cold snow outside. Immediately upon entering the room, Cruella did a little wiggle of absolutely pleasure at being out of the cold and around the scent of alcohol. Even Russell and Hook had to admit that they were incredibly comfortable in this place.

"If y'all will excuse me, I've been suckin' only y'all's blood for a month now," Russell whispered to his comrades. "I'm gonna go find someone I can really sink my fangs into."
Russell excused himself, leaving Hook and Cruella to walk over to the bar. Hook ordered them two drinks and paid with a couple gold pieces he had tucked away.

"I do so love a man who buys me drinks and expects nothing in return," Cruella said as she began to guzzle her beer. "Aren't you just a perfect gentleman."

"I'm always a gentleman," Hook said. "But who said I want nothing in return?"

"I did, just now," Cruella answered with a wink.

"Fair enough, m'lady," Hook said as he took a swig of his own beer.

"Well now!" a deep voice behind them said.

A pair of strong hands clapped Hook and Cruella on the shoulders. The pair turned to see a muscular man with a strong jawline leaning over their shoulders.

"We don't get many new faces around here," the man said. "But everyone is welcome here in my establishment."

"Well aren't you a hospitable one," Cruella said.

"Why thank you," the man replied with a picture perfect grin. "Where you from?"

The unwanted guest was obviously sizing them both up, even though he was pretending not to. Hook could read plainly on his face that this man was picturing Cruella undressed and was trying to decide if Hook was a threat to his manhood.

"Quite far from here," Hook answered. "Much farther than you've travelled, I'm sure."

"Ooh, this is a fine pelt," the man said, paying Hook no mind and petting Cruella's coat. "Wolf skin?"

"Yeti, if you can believe it," Cruella replied as she brushed the man's unwashed hands away from her favorite fur. "Killing it may have been abominable, but at least there won't be any more yellow snow cones."

The man let out a hearty chuckle at that. "Well I'm something of a hunter myself. You can see just a few of my kills mounted on the wall over there."

Cruella's tone instantly shifted from disinterest to absolute adoration. "Oh, how lovely! I've always loved hunters. They're so... masculine and ferocious. Tell me, darling, do you ever make fur coats."

"Once or twice," the man said. "If you'd like, I could make you one tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, but we didn't exactly catch your name, sir," Hook said, trying to mask the disdain in his voice.

The man let out a deep, hearty laugh. "You have to be new in town if you don't know me. I'm something of a big deal around here. My name is Gaston."

Chapter End Notes
Morticon, Necrolai, Leanbow, Calindor, and Niella are all from Power Rangers: Mystic Force. Alegaera and Majesterian are both just random OCs set in that universe so that the Master could have some generals that he lost in the prologue battle.

Gaston is from Beauty and the Beast.
"And that was how I single-handedly subdued the Black Forest Boar," Gaston boasted as he finished his story.

"Absolutely fascinating," Cruella said through a yawn.

Hook was resting his head on his right hand whilst carving a crude image of Gaston being gored by a boar on the bar counter. Hook longed to drag Gaston back to the Jolly Roger and force him to walk the plank. A good old fashion plank walking always lifted Hook's spirits. Yet the current logistics of it made the whole affair an impractical detour. If he wanted Gaston and his big mouth dead, it would have to be a quick slit of the throat or a swift hook to the jugular. Just as Hook started to seriously indulge the thought of Gaston bleeding out, the bar's doors swung open, and a dimunitive man waddled in.

"GASTON!" the man cried out.

"LeFou?" Gaston said. "I told you not to move from your post until Belle and her father came home! You'd better have a-"

"THEY'RE BACK!" LeFou said. "Both of 'em! They're at the farm house now!"

"Excellent!" Gaston said with a sinister laugh. "Go rouse Monsieur D'Arque! It sounds like the Maison des Lunes is about to get a new resident. My apologies, Cruella, but you'll have to excuse me. This is quite important."

"Oh, don't worry darling, you can go," Cruella replied.

Gaston and LeFou barged out of the bar with an enoutrage of curious patrons following them out.

"Oh that was absolutely wretched," Cruella said to Hook after Gaston was out of earshot. "It was like listening to... well, you."

"Me?" Hook asked. "I've far more interesting tales than that burly peasant."

"Darling, I love you, but you really don't," Cruella said.

Hook was about to argue, but thought better of it. "Our vexatious acquaintance mentioned Belle returning to her home. Perhaps the princess has delivered herself to us."

Cruella groaned. "Do we really have to bother going after the princess?"

"Aye, we do," Hook said. "Lest we wish to incurr the wrath of the Master."

"Fine, but you're the one who's going to go get Russell," Cruella said as she reached over the bar and poured herself another mug of beer.

Hook shook his head as he hopped down from his stool. "Sometimes I wonder why Maleficent ever bothered inducting you into our crew."

Cruella shrugged. "Someone has to be the beautiful and fabulous one."
"I think Loki has you beat on that front," Hook quipped.

Loki and Doctor Doom stepped out of the Corridor of Darkness onto one of the rooftops in the Agrabah Bazaar. The entire city was overcast and took on a maroon hue. Mirage was in power, and her influence was tangible throughout the city.

"I almost hate to strip Mirage of her power to redecorate," Loki mused. "This city is far more aesthetically pleasing than when last I stepped foot here."

"Loki, are you certain this Amuk Moonrah will be powerful enough to subdue the Master?" Doom asked. "After all, you yourself managed to imprison him."

"Because my mind is the most powerful weapon in my arsenal," Loki said, tapping his head to drive home the meaning. "A battle of raw power against dear Amuk would not have favored me."

"How big of you to admit that your magical abilities are second rate," Doom said teasingly. "As usual, the burden of being the more powerful partner falls upon my shoulders."

"Oh you wish," Loki said with a laugh. "A mortal is a mortal no matter the fineries with which it dresses itself."

Doom began to reply, but a clap of thunder striking nearby drew both of their attention away from the banter. Loki didn't know whether to grin wickedly or to scowl, and his resulting expression was something of a hybrid between the two. He knew the difference between mundane lightning and that which he had just heard, and he knew it well.

"It should figure that he is here," Loki said.

"How would you like to proceed?" Doom asked. "We can easily escape his notice if we act with a surgical precision."

"On the contrary," Loki said, wagging his finger. "I'd very much like the chance to see my dear brother again."

Joel lit a cigarette as he left the club. He'd done well for himself on tips that evening. His mother always berated him for working as a "stripper" (Joel preferred "exotic dancer"), but he made better munny dancing and taking off his clothes than he ever did working retail. Now that Ratigan was gone and the Radiant Garden citizens felt safe to go out and party again, business was picking up considerably.

Joel never had any qualms about walking home alone at night. Radiant Garden's Claymore system took care of any Heartless that spawned, and though the town's gangs were dangerous, they kept street crime under control and had a code of conduct for members. Committing a mugging or homicide on the gangs' turf was practically asking for a capo to hunt you down and string you up by your toenails. That was why when Joel first heard the rustling in the alley, he assumed it was just an alley cat.

Joel never saw the bat coming when it attacked. It was huge, nearly ten feet tall. It's fur was almost all black with streaks of purple decorating its face and torso. Over its chest was a solid white crucifix pattern that stood out clearly from the rest of the beast. Joel tried to scream, but the bat sliced his throat to ribbons before he got the chance. The bat greedily devoured the corpse of the young man, leaving only a blood stain and some shattered bones behind.
With a mighty flap of its wings, the bat took off into the night sky, for the night was still young and there were other meals to be had.

The grizzly remains of Joel were found by the City Watch, and, at first light, the Restoration Committee was on the case. Leon, Cid, and Merlin gathered at the scene of the crime, looking over evidence to determine the likely cause of the murder.

"This is a Youth League neighborhood," the City Watchman explained. "You think maybe a fight club match got a little heated?"

"Nooj would've cleaned it up himself if it did," Leon said as he crouched down to examine the blood. "He doesn't trust the Committee, and he's particular about his rules. He'd have given the body a proper burial and punished the offender. Leaving a scene for a homicide investigation would've been a major headache for him."

"No ordinary human could do this," Merlin said. "Could it have been a Heartless?"

"Can't be," Cid barked as he flipped through several windows on his tablet. "The Claymores are at 99% effectiveness in this neighborhood. Even if some goddamn Heartless had managed to get in here and kill somebody, the Claymores' data would've still picked it up. I designed 'em to analyze and learn from the Heartless."

"If you ask me, you put too much faith in that technology," Merlin huffed. "The Heartless aren't creatures of science. For you all know, they could be able to evade your scanners."

"Bullshit," Cid replied. "How 'bout you worry about your loony mumbo jumbo, and I'll worry 'bout the Claymores."

"Regardless, I've never seen a Heartless leave a victim so brutalized," Leon said as he stood up. "I think it's pretty clear that this was something we've never seen before. Here, Merlin, I've got a hair sample. Think you can analyze it?"

Merlin took the plastic bag containing the purple and black clump of hair. "Odds are this was simply our victim's hair, not the culprit's. However, it might be enough to identify the victim so that we can notify his or her family."

"Steve Newlin's gonna have a fuckin' field day with this one," Cid sighed.

"I haven't seen him on the air the past few days," Leon shrugged. "Maybe he cooled down?"

"Highly doubtful," Merlin replied.

As the Restoration Committee went their separate ways, the City Watchmen started to clean up the blood. One of the Watchmen had one arm heavily tattooed and his hair styled in a mohawk, neither of which were regulation. The others just figured that the strange Watchman's supervisor would worry about him so they didn't have to. It helped that Daken was releasing just enough of his pheromones to make himself unobtrusive to the other Watchmen.

Daken sniffed the scene and picked up the unmistakeable scent of Steve Newlin. Steve had definitely be the one behind the grizzly murder. Yet Steve's scent was somehow different. It was darker, more animalistic, and it had a distinctly leathery twang to it. Daken knew it had to be the work of the Dragon Tooth. Steve would never have been this sloppy in his right mind. It was clear that the Overtakers' distinguished acting leader was no longer in the picture.
The only thing left for Daken to figure out was what that meant for him.

After peeling Russell away from the corpse he was in the process of exsanguinating, the three Overtakers made their way out to the farm house where Gaston and his crew had gone. A mob had formed to have Belle's father, Maurice, locked away in an insane asylum.

"The ugliest sides of humanity," Russell said, shaking his head. "A blind mob mentality, nobody thinkin' for their fuckin' selves. They all deserve to be ruled over by us, every last one of them."

"No arguments here, darling," Cruella agreed.

"We can use this chaos to our advantage," Hook said. "We can divert their attention elsewhere, then grab Belle."

"Got any bright ideas on how exactly to do that?" Cruella asked.

Before Hook could respond, Belle rushed out of the house with a silver mirror in hand.

"My father's not crazy and I can prove it!" Belle yelled over the ruckus. "Show me the Beast!"

The mirror sparked with green energy, and the glass washed over with magic to reveal the image of a monstrous creature roaring ferociously. The crowd gasped and cried out in horror at the image shown in the mirror's reflection. Hook squinted at the image. This beast was a far more literal monster than Rumplestiltskin, but Hook knew the way that the stories worked across realms. The Beast was this world's counterpart of Rumplestiltskin. He may not have been the man who killed Milah, but surely the Beast bore that sin by mere association.

"Is it dangerous?" a woman in the crowd asked.

"Oh no, he'd never hurt anyone!" Belle said. "Please, I know he looks vicious, but he's really kind and gentle. He's my friend!"

"Well that's a lucky break," Russell said. "The crowd's distracted itself. Gotta love those lucky breaks, right Hook?"

That was when Russell and Cruella noticed that Hook had rushed into the thick of the mob and jumped onto a barrel to tower over the crowd.

"The beast will make off with your children!" Hook shouted. "He'll come after them in the night!"

"NO!" Belle cried out.

"We're not safe until his head is mounted on my wall!" Gaston proclaimed, trying to draw attention back over to himself. "I say we KILL THE BEAST!"

The crowd cheered in agreement.

"We're not safe until he's dead!" Russell cried out to add to the confusion.

"He'll come stalking us at night!" the baker agreed.

"He'll sacrifice our very best furs to his monstrous appetite!" Cruella added.

"He'll wreak havoc on our village if we let him wander free!" the woodcutter declared.
Hook grinned. "So it's time to action, mates. It's time to follow-

"ME!" Gaston interrupted, shoving Hook off his elevated stage.

The crowd cheered in affirmation. Hook gritted his teeth and had to restrain himself from running Gaston through for interrupting him. Hook picked himself up, dusted himself off, and turned back to the crowds.

"Through the mist and the woods," Hook called out, "you'll find yourself at the drawbridge of a castle. And there's something truly terrible inside."

"It's a Beast!" Gaston said, jumping in, much to Hook's chagrin. "He's as tall as a mountain with massive paws and killer claws! We won't be coming home until he's good and dead!"

"Aye, KILL THE BEAST!" Hook shouted, prompting cheers from the crowd.

Hook shot a smug grin at Gaston, taunting the local boy to go further.

"No!" Belle yelled as she ran up and grabbed Gaston. "I won't let you do this!"

"If you're not with us, you're against us!" Gaston said as he grabbed firmly onto her wrist. "Bring the old man! We can't have them running off to warn the creature!"

Though Belle and Maurice fought to get free, Gaston and the mob forced them down into the cellar of the farm house and locked the iron latch on the outside of the cellar door. Belle and Maurice's protests were barely audible over the raucous of the crowd. Hook, Russell, and Cruella shared a knowing look with each other. While the mob was busy with the Beast, Belle would be left unguarded and ripe for the taking.

"We'll rid the village of this Beast!" Gaston declared as he mounted his horse. "Who's with me?"

The men of the crowd all raised their voices and brandished their torches and pitchforks, hungry for the blood of the Beast. As the procession made their way towards the forest, Russell and Cruella made their way towards the cellar. It was only after a moment that they realized Hook wasn't with them. Russell scanned over the crowd and saw Hook marching among them towards the woods. Russell sighed and dashed over to his ally.

"We're here to nab the princess," Russell said as he grabbed Hook's arm. "What the fuck are you doin'?"

"Let go of me, mate," Hook said as he wriggled free of Russell's grasp. "I failed to get my revenge on the Beast who killed my Milah. I'm not letting this one live! I can make sure that this story gets the happy ending it deserves!"

"So he's guilty by association? That's really it?" Russell asked. "Why don't we focus on what really matters here? We grab the princess, and once we're free of the Master, then you can kill your actual beast instead of a symbolic one. How's that sound?"

"No, you two can get the princess," Hook said as he marched back towards the procession. "I'm getting my revenge."

"Unbe-fucking-lievable," Russell growled as Cruella approached.

"Make me a coat out of his pelt!" Cruella called after Hook.
Russell shot her a venomous glare.

Cruella shrugged. "What? We can't both get a happy ending?"

Sora's team was fast asleep in Aladdin's loft. The heroes had been using their friend's house as a base of operations to free the city from Mirage's control. Only six of Sora's crew came to Agrabah. The others stayed behind in a place called Traverse Town to tend to the refugees displaced by the darkness. Donald and Goofy were snoring loudly as they huddled together for warmth. The Ghost Rider, currently in his Johnny Blaze form, was snoozing propped up against his motorcycle. Sora and Riku were snuggled together with Sora wrapped up safely in Riku's arms. Only Thor sat awake, unable to sleep.

A childlike wail seemed to come from just outside the house. Thor, figuring that he could handle the situation without disturbing his friends, quietly left the loft. As he stepped out into the darkened street, there was no sign of the child. Thor assumed the cry he'd heard was nothing more than a trick of the wind and prepared to head back inside. But then he heard it again, this time coming from one street over. Thor ran towards the sound as quickly as he could, but when he arrived one street over, there was nothing there.

Thor walked down the street with Mjolnir in hand. Agrabah had been ravaged by Heartless and Fire Cats and other terrifying creatures of the dark. Though it was possible that Thor had in fact heard a helpless child in need, Thor was far too seasoned of a warrior not to suspect that the wail had been a magical lure. The child's cry echoed again further down the street, and Thor raced towards it. As Thor followed the sound to what seemed to be its source, he found himself in a back alley secluded from the main marketplace and several blocks away from Aladdin's loft. Thor's grip on Mjolnir tightened. He smelled a trap.

"Hello brother," a familiar voice cooed.

Thor whirled around to the source of the voice and found Loki sitting atop a ledge. Thor held Mjolnir in front of himself, threateningly, readying himself for a fight.

Loki merely smirked at the gesture. "I missed you too."

"Do I look to be in a gaming mood?" Thor asked, his tone as fearsome as a storm.

"Well, you've never been much one for my games," Loki said with a sigh. "Yet who else could I play them with?"

"You were to serve out your punishment in the Hall of Nastrond," Thor bellowed.

"Yes, well, I didn't find it to my liking," Loki said, his hand drifting absently to his eyes. "Eternal torture is a cruel fate indeed."

"No crueler than the pain and death you wrought upon Asgard," Thor said. "After the lives you took and lines you crossed, the Hall of Nastrond was a mercy from our father."

"Your father!" Loki spat as he hopped down from his perch. "He is of no blood of mine. Nor are you."

"We were raised together," Thor pleaded. "We played together. We fought together. Do you remember none of that?"

"I remember a shadow," Loki answered. "Living in the shade your 'greatness.' I remember being the
'trickster' and the unfavored. What other destiny could I have had? Loki was named the villain of the story before it had even begun."

"You're only a villain because you chose to become one," Thor argued. "You let your imagined slights turn you bitter. No words behind your back caused you to drown you kin in blood. No words caused you to help Doctor Doom's evil schemes, and no words are causing you to spread darkness throughout the worlds now."

Loki's smirk twisted into a scowl as he shoved Thor aside to walk a bit down the street.

"I've seen worlds you've never known about!" Loki declared. "I have grown, Son of Odin, in my freedom from Odin's leesh. Yet you... you are always so utterly obedient to the old tyrant. You turn a blind eye to Odin's cruelty and evil. You think Odin's word is the measure of morality? You let him poison all of Asgard with the shadows of darkness hanging thick from his heart! Yes, I may have chosen a dark path, but you've been walking one just as dark, completely unknowingly."

"I know right from wrong, Loki," Thor growled. "Do not attempt to sway me with your mind games! Listen well! You will return with me to face Asgardian justice. Eventually you will see the light and stand by my side again as a brother. My heart longs for that day."

Loki smirked at that. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

"No, brother," Loki said, shaking his head. "I won't."

Loki vanished into a Corridor of Darkness. Thor attempted to hurl Mjolnir at his opponent, but the hammer passed harmlessly through empty air. Loki was gone. Thor caught the hammer as it flew back. He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Brother..." Thor said somberly as he turned to make his way back to the loft.

Loki and Doom watched as Thor walked away from a nearby rooftop, the burden of his encounter with Loki apparently taking a physical toll on his posture.

"I still do not understand why you didn't allow me to kill him," Doom said. "We had Thor securely in our grasp. The two of us together would have spelled his destruction."

"Death is a crude thing," Loki answered. "Mundane and inglorious. But to leave one to live with the pain of knowing that the one thing they desire is the only thing out of their reach? That is a fate far more elegant and intriguing by my measure."

"Bah!" Doom scoffed, turning away from the ledge. "You may justify your decision any way you desire, but it's clear to me that you still hold out hope that Thor will one day bare witness to your rule of Asgard and admit your rightful superiority."

"He will," Loki said. "One day."

"You delude yourself," Doom said.

"Do not lecture me as if you do not wish for the same from Reed Richards," Loki replied.

"Touché," Doom admitted.

Loki watched as his brother walked away. Despite everything, he had missed Thor, and even their contentious conversation had satisfied a part of him that yearned for a brotherly relationship in any form that it took. As much as Loki cared for Victor, the fearsome Doctor Doom would never truly
understand that. Loki caught himself remembering a few of the good days with Thor. He quickly pushed them out of his mind. *Sentiment.*

Chapter End Notes

LeFou, Belle, and Maurice are all from Beauty and the Beast.
Pride Before the Fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Maleficent strolled into the throne room with her head held high. The Horned King and Koragg may have technically outranked her, but no one was ever truly above the Mistress of All Evil. She intended to convey that meaning plainly. She did not bow or avert her eyes or address her "superiors" with honorifics.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Maleficent," the Horned King said.

"You speak as though I had a choice in the matter," Maleficent said with a sneer.

"Mind your tone!" Koragg barked. "Your cooperation up to this point has proven to be most valuable, but do not for a moment delude yourself into believing that you are not, by virtue of being the previous leader of the Overtakers, seen as a threat."

"Ah, but I am not the previous leader of the Overtakers," Maleficent stated plainly. "Though it is true that the Overtakers owe allegiance to the Master, I am the only leader of the Overtakers. The only reason you hold any authority over the Overtakers is through me. Do not forget that."

Koragg growled and began to draw his blade, but the Horned King held out a hand to stop him.

"A semantic difference and nothing more," the Horned King said. "As you are no doubt already aware, I have dispatched five of your Overtakers to procure a Princess of Heart for the Master."

"A poor selection for the task," Maleficent remarked. "Jafar, Grimhilde, or myself would have been more suitable choices. But you knew that."

"Of course," the Horned King chuckled. "They are bait for our true target. Yet, there is... a troubling development. The team I dispatched has divided itself between two worlds to pursue two different princesses. To the Fabled Countryside went the pirate, the vampire, and the harlot. To Agrabah went the god and the fallen king. This was not what the Master wanted."

Maleficent smirked to herself. She knew Loki and Doom had been smart enough to realize that they were being played. The fact that they'd elected to go to Agrabah told Maleficent all she needed to know of their intentions.

"Hmph, perhaps you should have been more specific in your directions," Maleficent said, prompting another growl from Koragg. "I'm certain the Master would not approve of his chosen mouthpiece failing at so simple a task."

"Or perhaps your Overtakers are seeking to wriggle free of the Master's clutches," the Horned King hissed. "I do not believe I have to remind you what the consequences of that will be."

Maleficent locked eyes with the Horned King. The decrepit king's red eyes were like embers within his skeletal sockets that amplified their intensity as he became more determined to exert his control. Still, Maleficent did not waver. She'd bowed to the Master, but this lesser fool would never force her into submission. Realizing that he was losing the stare-down, the Horned King huffed and looked away. Maleficent smiled at her victory.

"You will bring your Overtakers to heel," the Horned King ordered. "They will deviate from my
orders no further, and should I even suspect a single whiff of treachery, it will be on your head, Maleficent."

Maleficent turned her back on the Master's stooges and proceeded toward the door.

"Enjoy your seat of power for now, Horned King," she said casually. "The Master will not favor you forever, and when you lose his favor, I shall quite enjoy bearing witness to your destruction."

With her warning issued, Maleficent left the Horned King and Koragg with their "happy" thoughts. A sinister smile never left her face.

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Once Gaston's mob cleared out, Russell and Cruella made their way to the cellar where Belle was imprisoned. Russell mused that this would be the easiest kidnapping he ever did, like shooting fish in a barrel. Of course, as the easy tasks are wont to do, things went wrong. As Russell broke the iron lock, he could hear wings flapping.

"GET DOWN!" Russell shouted as he dragged Cruella down to the ground just in time to avoid something large swooping overhead.

"Oh the devil take it!" Cruella cursed. "You've gotten one of my best furs covered in dirt!"

"Better than blood," Russell growled. "Look!"

Cruella strained her eyes to see their assailant against the black night sky, but eventually she spotted it as well. Cruella's blood ran cold. She'd seen this creature before, and she liked it even less then.

"That's the Chernabog!" Cruella said. "He feeds on the darkest of hearts. Maleficent, Ursula, and I encountered the wretched beast back in Storybrooke."

"Then what the fuck is it doin' here?" Russell asked. "A Princesses of Heart ain't exactly high on the list of the darkest hearts."

The Chernabog descended once more and unleashed a powerful gust of wind that sent Cruella and Russell flying in opposite directions. Russell quickly recovered and dashed at vampiric speed to catch Cruella before she could hit the ground.

"Thank you, darling!" Cruella said as she struggled to comb her unruly hair out of her eyes.

Russell sped off with Cruella in his arms off to a nearby forest clearing away from the beast's wrath.

"How the fuck do we beat that thing?" Russell asked.

"According to Rumple, church bells," Cruella said. "But apparently those weren't quite a permanent solution last time."

"This had to be why the Master sent us," Russell growled. "We were bait for that creature. He must've known it'd be attracted to the Princesses of Heart."

"Bright lights cast deep shadows, after all," Cruella added. "So, what's the plan? How are we going to grab the princess and evade that monstrosity?"

"We're not," Russell replied. "I'm sick of this shit. Master or no Master, I'm not gettin' eaten by some Churn-a-butter bullshit. We're grabbin' our moron pirate, and we're doing exactly what I said we should from the start of this little excursion: going back to Villain's Vale."
"Count me in," Cruella huffed. "This has gone on far too long for my tastes."

Mirage watched the battle from the palace balcony. Sora, Riku, Thor, Ghost Rider, Donald, and Goofy were down in the menagerie locked in combat with Mirage's most powerful Heartless: the Bast Zisa, a variation on a Kurt Zisa only with a panther head instead of a cobra and arms that burned with a raging inferno. It was truly one of Mirage's finest creations... which made it all the more infuriating when the band of heroes destroyed it after a well fought battle.

Mirage hissed in anger and flew back into the throne room. The Bast Zisa was her last line of defense keeping the heroes out of the palace. Now she would have to fight against the heroes personally. Mirage flew past the petrified remains of Aladdin and his friends and smiled. Soon Sora and his friends would join Aladdin as part of her statuary. Mirage wasn't worried. Her hold on Agrabah was secure thanks to the powers she'd gained from Amuk Moonrah.

The Crystal of Ix holding Amuk Moonrah was situated next to her throne for easy access. With just one touch of the crystal, Mirage could absorb powers beyond anything her enemies could even dream of. Her mouth watered in anticipation. However, her path to the crystal was blocked by a Corridor of Darkness that appeared in front of her.

"Well now, look what you done with this place," Loki said as he and Doom emerged from the portal. "Perhaps I'll hire you as my interior decorator once Asgard is mine."

"Loki, get out of my way!" Mirage spat. "I've a battle on its way up right now, and I need the powers of Amuk to win it."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid that'll be a problem," Loki said. "You see, I'm taking dear Amuk back with me."

Mirage hissed. "You traded him away to me! Our deal was-"

"Our deal was that you should have him for a hundred and one days," Loki reiterated. "That time has come and gone. Amuk is mine by right once more."

Mirage's eyes widened in fury at the realization. "Loki, please, your brother is on his way here. I'll destroy him for you if you just let me continue to use Amuk for one last battle."

"Tempting," Loki said, scratching his chin. "But no. Best of luck maintaining your control over this world."

The God of Mischief snapped his fingers, and, all at once, Loki, Doom, and the Crystal of Ix containing Amuk vanished into a flash of darkness. Mirage angrily swiped her claws, decimating a nearby pillar. She could already hear Sora and his friends converging upon the throne room. Her reign was over. There was little point is staying to be defeated. With a yowl of fury, Mirage teleported back to Morbia, leaving Agrabah unguarded for Sora to free.

The mob's foray into the castle saw the townsfolk attacked by magical furniture upon entering the foyer. Hook had little interest in battling cutlery, and he saw that Gaston had the same idea. Gaston pushed ahead into the West Wing of the castle, and Hook followed after him, several paces behind. The brash hunter, however, quickly outdistanced the captain. Hook found himself in a hallway lined with doors that all looked to be in a state of disrepair.

Hook had no idea which one to choose until he heard a roar of pain, the shattering of glass, and a laugh of triumph coming from the one at the far end of the hallway. Hook burst into the room to find
the large glass door shattered, allowing the rain from the storm that had picked up outside to spatter onto the tiled floor. Hook proceeded out on the rainy balcony, yet Gaston and the Beast were nowhere to be found.

"What's the matter, Beast? Too kind and gentle to fight back?" Gaston's voice echoed from below.

Hook peered over the edge of the balcony to find that Gaston had the Beast cornered on a ledge on the other side of the roof. From Hook's vantage point, the Beast seemed docile and resigned to its fate. Gaston brandished a stone club that he had apparently broken off of one of the gargoyles adorning the parapets. Hook cursed to himself. The local bumpkin was about to deprive Hook of his symbolic revenge. That could not be allowed. Hook quickly started to descend down the roof.

"NO!" Belle screamed as she rode up to the castle on horseback.

"Belle?" Beast whispered weakly as he looked down to see the source of the voice.

"NO! GASTON, DON'T!" Belle shouted.

But Gaston did not heed her request. Gaston brought down the club, preparing to bash in his opponent's head. But Belle's return lit a fire in the Beast's heart. He grabbed the club in midair and halted its descent. Gaston's eyes went wide with fear as the Beast forced him back further up the roof. The two struggled on either side of the stone club, until Gaston's foot slipped and he slid down to a lower and flatter part of the roof. The Beast lunged after him. The two adversaries stood face to face once they regained their footing.

"It's over, Beast!" Gaston taunted with the club raised high above his head. "BELLE IS MI-"

But Gaston never got the chance to finish his sentence. The Beast's eyes went wide as he saw a soaking red cutlass protruding from Gaston's chest. Hook pulled his sword free of Gaston and tossed the hunter's still warm corpse over the edge of the roof. Hook would have rather had the fool walk the plank, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

"Why?" the Beast asked in disbelief.

"Yes, well, I couldn't have him ruining my vengeance, could I?" Hook said with a laugh as he gestured with his sword at the Beast.

"I've done NOTHING to you!" the Beast growled.

"That's true, but there was another beast who killed someone very close to me," Hook said, never taking his eyes off his opponent. "I couldn't kill that beast, so I'm settling for you. Besides, a little birdie told me that you helped Sora kill a friend of mine. The name Maleficent ring a bell?"

"MALEFICENT?" the Beast bellowed. "She'll NEVER take Belle from me again!"

"You won't exactly get a say in that," Hook taunted.

The Beast lunged for Hook and tackled him. Hook swung wildly with his hook to keep the Beast's jaws clear of his face. After a second or two of struggling, Hook managed to lodge his foot in the Beast's stomach and kick his enemy off of him. The Beast rolled back into the shadows. Hook pressed onward, seeing the Beast's blurred silhouette in the rain. Hook swung wildly with his sword at the silhouette, but his blade clanged harmlessly off a stone gargoyle.

"Come out and fight, Beast!" Hook spat. "I shouldn't be surprised that you're a coward. The beast I once knew was a coward as well."
Hook proceeded cautiously down a poorly lit row of gargoyles, keeping his blade aimed at any shadow that moved.

"You beasts are all the same!" Hook called out. "Cowards, unlovable. Everyone you've ever held dear has either run away or been killed. You're nothing but a monster, a curse who brings ruin upon everyone around him, and that's all you'll ever be!"

Hook caught a glimpse of movement in his periphery vision. The pirate smiled to himself. His baiting words worked. Hook whirled around and swung with his sword. The Beast barely managed to jump back in time to avoid a clean slice across of the stomach. Hook pressed forward, swinging his sword wildly and forcing the Beast further and further back. Once the edge of the roof was clearly in sight, Hook's grin turned positively demonic.

"Now, it's over, Beast!" Hook declared. "TIME TO DIE!"

The Beast growled and with a swift jab forward, he punched Hook in the chest, causing the pirate to stagger backwards and drop his sword. Hook struggled to regain his breath and footing, but before he could, the Beast hoisted him up by his shirt collar and dangled him over the edge of the roof.

"Do it, DO IT!" Hook dared. "Kill me! Show everyone the monster you really are! Show Belle how powerful you are."

Hook laughed as the Beast's expression softened. The fool creature was easily baited into mercy if it meant saving face with Belle. The Beast backed up and pulled Hook in closer to his face.

"Get out!" the Beast ordered as he tossed Hook aside onto a flat and stable part of the roof.

"BEAST!" Belle cried out from the balcony up above.

The Beast turned around and his expression lightened up with love and joy. "Belle!"

Hook pulled himself up to his feet as the Beast began to climb up the roof back up to Belle. Hook quickly searched for his sword, but the blade was nowhere to be found.

"Damn!" Hook cursed, knowing that the blade likely fell into the ravine below, lost forever.

Vengeance was the only thought left in Hook's mind. Hook barreled up the side of the roof, not giving a care to the slippery state of the rain soaked stones.

"You came back!" the Beast said tenderly as he reached Belle.

The Beast stroked Belle's hair lovingly, and she smiled at him. For a moment everything was perfect for the beauty and the beast...

...And then it wasn't. The Beast howled in pain as Hook buried his hook deep into his opponent's side. Hook could feel the tip of the hook puncture an internal organ, and the pirate laughed as he knew he'd delivered the creature a death wound. The Beast roared in agony and flailed backwards. Hook leaned back to avoid the Beast's flailing, but the foothold in which Hook was standing was soaked from the rain. Hook slipped and waved his arms as he felt himself falling backwards, desperate to grab onto anything.

With a shrill scream unbecoming of the captain, Hook fell like a stone into the ravine.

The Jolly Roger hovered a mile away from the Beast's Castle. Russell and Loki secured Amuk
Moonrah below deck whilst Cruella and Doom kept a look out for the Chernabog. Cruella wasn't exactly at ease with that creature nearby, but Doom and Loki made her feel far more safe than she had been when it was just her and Russell.

"Once we collect Hook and y'all get underway, I'm gettin' the fuck out," Russell told Loki as they walked back on deck. "I'm goin' to get Steve, and we're stayin' as far away from the fuckin' Master as possible."

"You'll have Koragg hunting you down within the hour," Loki warned. "Better to stick with my plan."

"Which might just get us all killed anyway," Russell retorted. "I think I'll take my chances."

"OH MY GOD!" Cruella shrieked at something she saw through her telescope.

"Is it Chernabog? Where is he?" Doom asked.

"IT'S HOOK!" Cruella shouted. "HE'S FALLING!"

Like a shotgun, Russell took off from the deck of the ship, flying as fast as he could towards the castle. He could see Hook's body falling, and he knew it would be a close call. His only option to get there on time would be to speed up, and Russell knew that if he was even an inch off, he wouldn't be able to double back to catch Hook at this velocity. Russell swooped forward to where Hook would be and reached out...

His hands barely grazed the side of Hook's leather jacket. Russell, unable to stop in midair at this speed, crashed into the cliffside, dislodging immense clumps of dirt and rock. Russell grabbed onto the rock face and held himself there as he scanned the fog below for any signs of Hook. His vampiric hearing was far greater than any human's, yet even he couldn't hear Hook hitting the ground.

Still, there was very little hope a normal human had of surviving a fall from that height.

Chapter End Notes

The Beast is from Kingdom Hearts and Beauty and the Beast. Yes, I am well aware that Kingdom Hearts II's epilogue shows the Beast having already become human again. However, we have no time stamp on when that happens, so I'm going with that it has not yet happened as of this fanfic (though if you know the movie, you know what's about to happen).
Russell was sure Hook was dead as he studied the fog. Hook's foolish impetuousness was the only thing to blame for this loss, and Russell knew it well. However, Hook was a part of the Overtakers, and, no matter how much he'd brought this demise upon himself, he was still worthy of mourning. Perhaps one day, Hades could bring him back after this ordeal with the Master was done.

Suddenly, something caught Russell's eye. It was barely visible through the gloom, even with his enhanced vampiric sight. A circular stone platform ascended from the fog, and Russell let out a joyful laugh when he saw exactly who it was. Maleficent stood atop the platform with a black umbrella shielding her from the rain in one hand and her staff, held outward, in her other. The staff's orb glowed a bright shade of green shared by the body floating in front of her. Maleficent, with a smug pride present in her expression, levitated the still living Hook.

"You sure as Hell know how to make an entrance!" Russell proclaimed as she flew into earshot.

"I see my presence is needed now more than ever," Maleficent remarked. "It seems that some do not have the good sense to choose their battles carefully."

Hook grimaced and tried to look anywhere but at his allies. To Russell, he looked like one of those dogs that had been put in the cone of shame. Maleficent, by contrast, was taking far too much pleasure in embarrassing her foolish ally. The three villains soared through the rainy skies back to the Jolly Roger. Maleficent dropped Hook roughly onto the deck. The captain cursed at the fall, but he knew that Maleficent had saved him from a far worse landing.

The sound of fireworks drew the attention of the Overtakers back to the Beast's Castle. The storm gave way to a bright and sunny afternoon, and the very castle itself seemed to morph from ruined to extravagant and majestic. The Overtakers knew that the Beast's curse had been lifted. Hook gritted his teeth in frustration at his revenge being unfulfilled and his fall being for naught.

Loki patted Hook on the back. "Failure must truly burn you in more ways than one. I count myself most fortuitous not to be as incompetent as you."

Hook glared with cold fury at Loki but kept silent.

"It is good to see you out and well," Doom said to Maleficent. "I had feared that the Mistress of All Evil was lost to us."

"I have been well reminded who I am," Maleficent said with a nod. "I shall not surrender that so easily again."

"Yes, yes, I'm quite happy to see you and all that," Cruella began, "but can we cast off already? That wretched Chernabog is lurking about, and I am far too beautiful to have my heart made into a snack."

"Ah, so the Chernabog was the Master's true quarry," Maleficent said thoughtfully. "He must have feared the Hellbeast's power and hoped that a sacrifice of five dark hearts might dissuade it from venturing towards the Overtaken Kingdom."

"If the Master fears the Churn-a-Butter so much, then maybe we should ditch ol' Amuk and take it
instead," Russell suggested.

"And let Amuk loose to cause trouble for all of us later?" Loki asked. "You would have us swap one cosmic annoyance for another. Besides, we've no idea if Maleficent's suspicions are true. Suppose the Master wanted the Chernabog to expand his own power? We'd sign our own death warrants by delivering it to him. Better to maintain the surprise and uncertainty of introducing an element unknown to the Master."

"It's the uncertainty that worries me," Russell grumble.

"I, for one, concur with the trickster's plans," Hook chimed in. "I've no desire to confront that Chernabog beast again. You might say my heart just wouldn't be in it."

"You both have forgotten one crucial detail," Maleficent warned. "The Master consumes magic, even magic as potent as Amuk Moonrah's. He will make short work of any opposition mounted with such power."

"Then perhaps that is an outcome we must account for," Doom suggested.

Loki grinned mischievously. "I do so love it when you show an understanding of subterfuge. It warms my heart to know that I have imparted such a skill."

"Mister Newlin's messages indicate that his new recruit has been hard at work concocting a curse that can destroy the Master," Doom explained. "Can we not simply use Amuk's power to deliver the curse unto him? Deceive the Master into taking the curse willingly?"

"A risky gamble," Maleficent remarked, "but not an altogether unworthy one. Russell Edgington, instruct your partner to meet us here as quickly as possible. Tell him to bring the curse caster."

"I'll put in the call," Russell nodded as he punched in Steve's number on his phone.

Much to Russell's surprise, Daken was the one who answered.

"Ah, Russell, long time, no see," Daken said.


"Well, see, our acting leader's a little indisposed at the moment," Daken answered. "He's enjoying a well deserved break. What can I do for you?"


"I can't do that," Daken said. "As I said: indisposed."

"Listen to me, you little fucker," Russell said, his tone turning severe. "If I come back there and Steve has so much as a single scratch on him, I will personally eat, kill, and fuck you... not necessarily in that order."

There was a silent pause on the other end of the line. Russell's mind filled the void with cries of concern over Steve meeting the same fate as Talbot. The vampire king was seconds away from warping back to Villain's Vale to see him for himself.

"He's fine," Daken said after a few seconds. "Don't worry. He'll be there to give you a great big kiss when you get home. Don't be so dramatic. If you've got a message, I'll let him know and have him call you back."
Russell growled but saw that he had little choice but to trust Daken for now.

"Fine, tell Steve that I love him," Russell began, "and that Maleficent needs that curse casting recruit of yours to warp over the Fabled Countryside right now."

"Got it, will do," Daken said as he hung up the phone.

Russell stared at the now silent phone, suddenly racked with concern for his boyfriend.

Daken set the phone down and tried to decide on a course of action. His plan had always been to bait Steve Newlin into an ill advised direct conflict with the Restoration Committee, and the Dragon Tooth was the perfect means to do so. Daken wanted Steve taken down by the Committee so that he could assume command of the Overtakers and be totally guiltless when the others returned (if they returned). That was the plan, and it had almost worked. Then Russell had to call and get suspicious before everything could be neatly resolved.

Even if the Restoration Committee captured or killed the bat-form Steve Newlin, now Daken would always look suspicious to the other Overtakers. Every modicum of power that he'd accumulated would become all for nothing. He could charter a ship back to his home world and flee back to Romulus's protection, but even that might not be enough to escape the Overtakers' wrath. Besides, Daken was done with Romulus, and he had little interest in subjecting himself to his former mentor's hegemony once more. The only choice left was to go after Steve and save him. Daken hated that option, but he couldn't help smirking at the irony.

"Sarah! Mary!" Daken called out down the halls. "I need a spell to reverse a Dragon Tooth induced transformation, and I need it now."

Tracking down Steve wasn't the hard part. The mutated vampire had to feed at double the rate that he usually did, and that meant a considerable amount of blood shed. Daken could practically follow the scent of blood and gore right to its source. Steve, still a huge vampire bat, was currently eviscerating some streetwalker in Zero District. Daken knew that his real challenge was only just beginning. Daken looked at the vial of potion that Sarah and Mary concocted to turn Steve back to normal. Getting him to swallow it wasn't going to be easy.

He'd donned a mask and costume based on his father's Wolverine ensemble but taking a few queues from Japanese martial arts clothing for ease of movement. His identity would be secure and unrecognizable to the Radiant Gardeners, a necessary precaution. Daken was prepared to spring into action against Steve when a fire blast drilled the giant bat in the wings. As the bat shrieked, Daken looked to see Leon and Merlin running towards it. Steve attempted to fly away, but the burnt wing kept him grounded.

Leon and Merlin may have been heroes, but they would slay any monster threatening their city. Daken knew quite well that they would kill Steve if he didn't intervene. Daken sprinted into action and tackled Leon. Daken was careful not to extend his claws to give away his identity. Leon struggled, but Daken was stronger. He began to punch Leon's face, bloodying his fist with every blow. However, his attack was soon interrupted by Merlin sending him flying backwards with a bolt of light magic. Daken turned a handspring to right himself afterwards.

"Curaga!" Merlin called out as he cast a healing spell on Leon.

Steve attempted to scurry away in the confusion, but Daken immediately ran after the injured bat. He leaped onto Steve's back and wrapped his arms around the creature's neck, despite Steve's attempts to
throw him off. Daken struggled to get the vial of potion to Steve's mouth, but the bat's moments were too erratic and volatile for Daken to even get a lock on the beast's maw.

"I think I can must a banishment spell on the monster," Merlin said as he helped Leon get back to his feet. "However, the other man will be caught in it."

"I think that's what we call a win-win," Leon said as he rubbed his potently broken nose.

Daken finally inched the potion into Steve's mouth and let out a cry of victory as he forced it down the bat's throat. It would only be another moment until the potion worked its magic and returned Steve to normal.

"I banish thee to the realms beyond," Merlin chanted. "BEGONE!"

Merlin unleashed a bolt of light that washed over the giant bat. Daken attempted to jump out the way, but he too was engulfed by the spell. When the light cleared, both Steve and Daken were gone.

When Rasputin stepped out of the Corridor of Darkness onto the deck of the Jolly Roger, Maleficent's glare was positively venomous. It soon, however, gave way to a more coy and bemused expression. It was as if she were a cat that had originally been dead set on killing its prey but quickly changed its mind to play with it instead. Loki had come to admire that side of Maleficent. When first they'd met, she'd seemed like such a serious person; now, Loki saw clearly the more playful and tricky side to her. It was much the same way with Doom.

"Rasputin," Maleficent said. "What an... unexpected surprise."

"Nothing about it should be a surprise," Rasputin answered. "After all, being trapped and forgotten in your miserable vault shouldn't have made you forget my great powers!"

"Oh tut tut," Maleficent replied as she placed her pointer finger on her cheek bone. "Surely all those years locked away proved more desirable than the alternative."

"Marginally," Rasputin begrudgingly admitted. "At any rate, I've been hard at work on a curse that can counter the Master and tear him down."

"A very personal matter for you, Rasputin," Maleficent remarked. "After all, was it not the Master who delivered unto you that most... excruciating punishment during our brief visit together to that world?"

"Ahh... yes, I would... prefer not to speak of that... painful memory," Rasputin responded.

Maleficent nodded at his response and grinned. "Seize him!"

She tapped her staff twice on the deck, and two burly Defender Heartless appeared behind Rasputin and grabbed firmly onto his arms. Hook and Cruella seemed utterly baffled by Maleficent's swift change in demeanor towards Rasputin, and though Russell quickly caught onto her reasoning, it took him off guard. Doom and Loki, however, had been expecting this since the sorcerer first arrived.

"My dealings with Rasputin were conducted after the Master was sealed away," Maleficent said, her eyes never leaving her new captive. "You imitate him quite well, but cheap parlor tricks are insufficient to deceive me."

"Rasputin" chuckled at that. "Your amateur witches who tried reviving Rasputin are clearly not experienced necromancers. Trust me, I did them and you a favor by coming back to life. With the
spell they were invoking, it's a wonder they didn't accidentally wake a Great Old One."

"So the one called Rasputin was never revived?" Doom asked. "You, whomever you might be, intercepted the spell and posed as the intended subject of the resurrection to avoid suspicion."

"I can teach you the interception spell if you'd like," the sorcerer chuckled.

Maleficent raised an eyebrow in suspicion. "Reveal your true face, sorcerer."

"Rasputin" nodded and took a deep breath. His body became engulfed in darkness that blurred his shape. First the image of an armored Ancient Mystic colored blue and gold fizzled into focus but then quickly vanished. Then, from the darkness, the true form of the sorcerer appeared: that of a mummy clad in expensive silver and purple robes with a pronounced collar adorned with large glowing primary colored gemstones.

"Calindor," Maleficent stated in recognition. "Once one of the Master's most valued allies."

"A better forgotten state, I assure you," the sorcerer replied. "Although 'Calindor' is such an old hat name. I prefer to be called Imperious."

"Very well, Imperious, tell me," Maleficent began, "what is your purpose here? Why have you done all of this?"

Imperious casually brushed the Defender Heartless off of him. Russell bared his fangs to signify that the sorcerer should stand back. Imperious merely laughed in response.

"Enough of this strong arm posturing," Imperious said. "I've come for exactly the purpose I said I had: to help destroy the Master."

"Why would you want to destroy the beast you served?" Hook asked. "Have you no sense of honor?"

"Honor?" Imperious asked before bursting into raucous laughter. "Now you're starting to sound like that fool Koragg. Honor? I don't follow that ridiculous sentiment! The simple truth is that I was plotting to overthrow the Master during my entire stint as his general. My lack of success before my death makes this a matter of finishing what I'd started."

"Oh, I like him," Loki remarked with a smirk. "Let's keep him."

"We don't need him," Hook chimed in. "He's devious and treacherous. We already have to watch our backs for daggers slung by Loki and Doom. Erm... no offense, gentleman."

"None taken," Doom answered.

"You speak only the truth," Loki shrugged.

"At any rate, we hardly need another bloody backstabber in our ranks," Hook said, "particularly one with such extensive ties to the Master."

"Here I thought you'd be over the moon to add him," Cruella remarked to Hook. "After all, you do have a type for dangerous, power hungry, and over-the-top dramatic sorcerers. It's a wonder you and Loki have never fucked."

"Is that a challenge, Cruella?" Loki asked with a smirk.

"Bloody Hell, NO!" Hook sighed.
"Enough," Maleficent said and the Overtakers went silent. "Imperious, give me one good reason that I shouldn't banish you to the Realm of Darkness."

Imperious pulled out a foldable fan and extended it outwards, causing it to crackle with dark magic. "Because, my dear, I already have exactly the curse you need, and it's ready to tear the Master apart."

A smirk slowly crept onto Maleficent's lips. "Very well then. Welcome to the Overtakers, Imperious."

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The light cleared, and Daken found himself staring at a desolated New York City from the top of a tall office building. The skies were blood red from fire and bombs, and the once proud city's skyscrapers were a ruined shell of their former selves. The smell of gunpowder and burning hung heavy in the air, and though Daken initially wondered if this was the unfortunate fate of his home world's New York, what was left of the skyline was ever so slightly different. Daken wasn't exactly sure why Merlin's spell landed him and Steve here of all places, but he had no intentions of staying in exile.

Steve was laying a few feet away, his human appearance restored. The potion had worked... at least physically. Daken had no idea yet if Steve's mind had recovered along with the rest of him. The young vampire still had a pulse, but he was comatose and hardly showing any signs of waking any time soon. Daken peered over the edge of the building to try to get a feel for where they were. Best Daken could figure, they were somewhere in Hell's Kitchen, a few blocks away from Fisk Tower, if, in fact, this version of New York even had a Fisk Tower.

The sound of Steve starting to stir turned Daken's attention back to his companion. He knelt down beside the vampire, claws extended in case Steve woke up still under the mental influences of the Dragon Tooth. Steve's eyes blinked open. He looked incredibly confused both at Daken and the surrounding area. Daken couldn't help but compare Steve to a blackout drunk waking up the morning after a wild night.

"Wh.. where... am I?" Steve asked. "Daken? What?"

"Rise and shine, fang face," Daken said. "We're in some world's version of New York City. A pretty beat up version of it to boot."

"How... when... what?" Steve asked as he rubbed his eyes.

"Well, let's catch you up to the speed," Daken replied. "You were an idiot and used that fucking Dragon Tooth to turn yourself into a giant bat creature. I got stuck with the job of turning you back to normal, and I did, but not before Merlin zapped us both with a banishing spell off to who-the-fuck-knows-where. With me so far?"

"The Dragon Tooth... worked?" Steve asked.

"If by worked you mean it basically made you into a mindless animal, then yeah, it worked," Daken answered.

Steve suddenly looked down and saw that he was wearing nothing but the torn remains of a pair of jeans that didn't even cover his modesty. Daken had seen everything on him, and Steve knew that would be whispered behind his back for weeks.

"You couldn't have brought me a spare pair of clothes?" Steve asked with a groan as he attempted to strategically position to torn denim to hide his crotch. "And for that matter, why'd you even save me? After all, you did try to kill me."
"Being ungrateful, are we?" Daken scoffed. "First of all, I did not try to kill you. Secondly, I saved your ass because your damn boyfriend would have killed me if I didn't."

"Is Russell free? Can we call him to get us?" Steve asked eagerly.

"No and no," Daken said. "My phone got demolished in the teleportation. You and me are on our own. I was hoping you could open one of those Corridor of Darkness things."

Steve nodded, concentrated, and held out his hand to summon up a portal back to Villain's Vale. However, no portal came.

"What the fuck?" Steve asked.

"Guess reversing that Dragon Tooth bullshit took more out of you than we thought," Daken sighed. "We'll have to find a new way home."

Something that sounded like a pair of distant jets flew overhead, putting Daken and Steve both on edge. Daken prepared for a fight when he saw that the source of the noise was no jet; it was something he had thought was exclusive to his home world: goblin gliders. As the gliders descended, Daken saw and recognized their riders clearly, the Green Goblin and the Hobgoblin. Clearly this New York was some sort of parallel reality to Daken's own.

"This is where the interdimensional readings came from, Goblin," the Hobgoblin announced.

"Yet those two are clearly not Spider-Carnage!" the Green Goblin snarled. "He still hasn't returned!"

"Those two arriving now can't have been a coincidence!" the Hobgoblin added as he circled Daken and Steve.

"Yes, you're right, Hobgoblin," the Green Goblin agreed. "They must know something about where Spider-Carnage has gone!"

"Uh, hi, yeah, I'm standing right here," Daken said. "I don't know anything about this Spider-Carnage, but I do know you from my home dimension, Green Goblin... or should I say... Norman Osborn."

"THERE IS NO OSBORN ANY MORE!" the Green Goblin shrieked. "THERE IS ONLY THE GREEN GOBLIN!"

"You've got a death wish to mention that name to us," the Hobgoblin warned. "Maybe we'll do to you what we did to the rest of this city!"

"Please forgive my companion, he isn't exactly the brightest bulb in the shed if you know what I'm sayin'," Steve said in his friendliest voice possible. "Look, there's been a terrible mistake. We're actually in a bit of pickle, and we're not interested in this world at all. If you'll kindly just let us go on our merry way, we'd be much obliged."

The goblins each fired a titanium cable from their gliders. Despite Steve and Daken's attempts to evade, they both found themselves tied to gliders.

"You two will stand trial for Spider-Carnage's disappearance!" the Green Goblin declared. "And when you are found guilty, you will both be punished severely!"
Imperious is from Power Rangers: Mystic Force.

The Green Goblin, the Hobgoblin, and the destroyed version of New York is from the alternate Spider-Carnage reality from Spider-Man: the Animated Series.
The Past is Always Tense

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kairi stared wistfully up at the starry sky as her mind drifted to Sora and Riku. She knew her friends were more than capable of helping themselves out there, but that didn't stop her from missing them while they were away. Traverse Town's sky had an open view of the Etherium, with the myriad of other worlds manifesting as stars in the sky. It was truly beautiful and humbling to think about what a wide universe was out there.

"Hello kupo!" a tiny voice said from beside her.

Kairi looked down and smiled at the Moogle standing there. "Hello Monty. How are you today?"

"Doing well, kupo," Monty replied. "We got the requisition filled for extra tents and sleeping bags for the refugees. Should take care of everybody until we can finish refurbishing the apartments in the Fifth District."

"That's wonderful," Kairi said with a smile. "You and the other Moogles have been such a big help. We couldn't have done it without you guys!"

When the heroes sailed into the mists of Avalon, they were sent across worlds to Traverse Town. With the immense effusion of darkness that came from the Book of Prophecies, many had been forced to flee their home worlds. When the heroes arrived, they found a town flooded refugees in desperate need of help. The heroes' work over the past month had gone a long way for making Traverse Town into haven for the weary travelers.

Kairi heard the doors of the town's exterior wall open. Her heart soared when she saw Sora, Riku, Donald, Goofy, Thor, and Ghost Rider walk through them. They'd made it back alright! Kairi rushed over and hugged everyone. At Kairi's urging, Sora and Riku joined her at a table on the patio of the First District café whilst the other four dispersed to reunite with their other friends. The two boys recounted their adventures in Agrabah in full detail. Kairi loved hearing about the heroics that they'd gotten up to. It made her proud of all the good they were doing for the worlds.

"And then we fought this HUGE Heartless in front of the palace!" Sora said as he reached the end of his story. "It's arms were actually on fire!"

"Yeah, don't remind me," Riku said as his hand instinctively went to the back of his long hair.

Kairi noticed that the tips of Riku's locks had been burned and taken on a brownish-black hue.

"You should go see the Fairy Godmother about your hair," Kairi suggestion. "She's gotten the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique up and running while you guys were gone. She'll fix that up for you."

"Good thinking," Riku nodded. "I'll head over there once we're done here."

"SO we defeated the Heartless," Sora continued, "and then we rushed into the palace to face Mirage, but she was gone! At first we thought it was some kind of trick, but she actually abandoned Agrabah after we defeated her Heartless. So we turned Aladdin and the gang back to normal and helped them get things fixed up."

"Genie did most of the work there," Riku interjected.
"Hey! I helped move some barrels!" Sora insisted.

"You mean you napped on a barrel," Riku teased as he nudged his boyfriend Kairi giggled at that. The more things had changed, the more they'd stayed the same. Even with all of the villains and Heartless throughout the worlds, these little moments in between where they laughed and hung out like back on the island made it all worth it. Kairi hoped they could always be like this.

After finishing sharing their stories over coffee, Sora, Riku, and Kairi made their way to the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique in the Second District. Two little girls, presumably sisters danced out of the shop wearing princess dresses with their hair freshly curled and styled. They were practically giddy with excitement. It warmed Kairi's heart to see the kids smiling again. Life had been especially hard for the citizens of Traverse Town lately. Kairi was glad that they could help provide some joy to them in whatever form that took.

"Have a good day, girls!" the Fairy Godmother said as she waved good-bye. "Oh, such little darlings."

"Fairy Godmother!" Sora proclaimed with a big grin plastered on his face as he ran up to give the old fairy a hug.

"Sora!" she replied as she embraced her young friend. "Oh it's been too long! My, my! Look how much you've grown! It seems like just yesterday you were only this tall!"

The Fairy Godmother extended her hand outward at about the level of Sora's shoulder.

"Umm, hi," Riku said with an awkward wave.

Riku wasn't really sure how he should feel around the Fairy Godmother. After all, he had helped Maleficent hold Cinderella hostage years ago. The old woman didn't seem to hold any grudges, but he couldn't help but find himself a little on edge when faced with his past mistakes.

"And so good to see you too, Riku!" the Fairy Godmother said warmly. "Oh! Oh my!"

The Fairy Godmother walked up to Riku and started to examine his hair.

"Goodness gracious!" she said. "What's happened here?"

"A... uh... Heartless fire," Riku answered. "I was hoping you could fix it like it used to be."

"Well, I *could* repair the damage with magic," the Fairy Godmother said. "But the changes wouldn't be permanent. At the stroke of midnight, everything would go back to the way it was before. No, I'm afraid we'll have to cut it off. Quite a bit too."

Riku grimaced. He'd had long hair for as long as he could remember. This was going to be uncharted territory. But Riku just had to remind himself that change was a good thing.

"Okay, I trust you," Riku said.

"Wonderful!" the Fairy Godmother said as she escorted him to the barber chair in front of a bright pink vanity. "Have a seat please. Now then... oh dear... where did I put that wand?"

The Fairy Godmother fumbled around in her robe's pockets and the drawers of her vanity. Sora finally spotted it on the floor under the front counter.

"Oh thank you, dear," the Fairy Godmother said as Sora handed it back to her. "I swear, I'd lose my
head if it wasn't attached. Now then, Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo!"

With a twinkle of magic, the scissors, clippers, comb, and bottle of hairy spray sitting on the vanity began to float around Riku's head and immediately went to work. Riku was antsy the entire time with so many strange objects flying around his head. He couldn't relax for the entire fifteen minutes that it took. Sora and Kairi, while they waited, preoccupied themselves taking funny pictures with animal ear filters on Sora's GummiPhone.

"All right then," the Fairy Godmother said as she magically put away her hair care products. "You're all set, my dear."

Riku looked at himself in the mirror and gasped. At first he didn't even recognize himself. The Fairy Godmother had given him an undercut that was very short on the sides with longer hair up top that still wasn't anywhere close to being as long as his old hair. It was different, but the more that Riku looked at it, the more he liked it. Her found himself looking at his eyes a lot more now, as if the change in his chair had made them more vibrant as a result.

"WOHA!" Sora said as he looked him over. "Wow, Riku, you look amazing!"

"Very handsome!" Kairi agreed.

"Thank you, Fairy Godmother," Riku said with a smile. "Uh... what do I owe you?"

"Oh pish-posh!" she said with a wave of her hand. "I don't need your munny. Save it up for when you travel to other worlds."

Sora had already started rubbing his hand over the short and soft hair on the side of Riku's head.

"Well we should probably get going," Riku said. "Thank you again so much!"

"Oh! Before I forget!" the Fairy Godmother interjected.

She waved her wand and a card appeared by magic in Sora's hand.

"Huh?" he asked as he started to read it.

"It's an invitation for you and all of your friends," the Fairy Godmother said. "There's going to be a party at Cinderella's castle, and she wanted me to invite you all to attend!"

"A party!" Sora exclaimed. "Alright!"

"A party at Cinderella's castle?" Kairi asked. "Fairy Godmother, I'm going to need my hair done before I can go. I'll need a new dress too."

"You guys can go ahead," Riku said. "I don't think I'll go. She probably doesn't really want me there anyway."

"Riku, come on!" Sora urged. "It'll be fun!"

"Sora, look, I helped Maleficent keep Cinderella and the other princesses locked up in Hollow Bastion," Riku explained, his tone suddenly dead serious. "I don't deserve to take advantage of her hospitality after everything I did."

"Now none of that!" the Fairy Godmother chimed in. "You stop that right now! You were as much a prisoner in that horrible castle as Cinderella was. Oh Maleficent might've made you think you wanted to do the things you did, but she was using you and hurting you just in a different way. That's the
type of person she is. Maleficent herself was the only one whose fault it was for kidnapping Cinderella."

Riku thought about it for a minute. He'd always carried the burden of his guilt with him. He was the bad guy who had to make things right for all of the horrible things he did. Even having the love of his friends and the respect of a Keyblade master hadn't erased that guilt. He was afraid to give up that guilt because that guilt had helped him change to be better. But now that he had changed, was that guilt even still worth it?

"Listen to me now," the Fairy Godmother said as she placed a comforting arm on Riku's shoulder. "You are forgiven. It's time to set yourself free from the past. You are loved and worthy of love. Never forget that."

Sora and Kairi nodded and smiled to show that they agreed. Riku felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Weirdly enough, his mind drifted back to his hair. He'd used his long hair to hide his eyes and face from the outside world, and he carried around the weight and length of choices past. Now, he'd cut it off and set himself free. Free of guilt. Free of the past. It was a new day now, a new lighter day.

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The Goblins carted Steve and Daken back to an industrial factory with the word "Oscorp" written on the façade in big bold lettering. After they landed their gliders in the hanger, the Goblins unhooked Steve and Daken from them but kept their arms bound. Steve and Daken both struggled to get free, but the titanium bonds were made too well and the Goblins' were too strong. They were forced into a large office space deeper in the building where two men were already there conversing with one another.

One of the men was a fairly normal looking guy, heavyset and bald and sporting a white suit. Daken recognized him quite well from his counterpart back on his home world: Wilson Fisk, the Kingpin. The other man, by contrast, was inhuman in appearance, sporting mutated fleshed that was an eerie gray color, pins protruding from his shoulders, and yellow lenses covering his eyes. While Daken was fairly sure he'd seen someone similar looking in the papers back home, he couldn't place him.

"We need to be careful, Smythe," the Kingpin warned his companion. "Our very survival is now in-"

"We're baaaaaack," the Hobgoblin announced in a sing-song voice. "Did you two miss us?"

Kingpin sneered at the question. "What is the meaning of this? You two said you'd picked up interdimensional readings from the city, yet you return with nothing but a pair of civilians. Have you two not brutalized enough?"

"Is that a conscience coming from the mighty Kingpin?" the Green Goblin asked. "As a matter of fact, these two are the source of the readings we picked up. They know where Spider-Carnage went! Yet they refuse to tell us."

"Is that so?" Kingpin bellowed. "You two had better speak up quickly. The consequences will be most unpleasant if you don't!"

"For the fuckin' hundredth time," Steve said, "we don't know anything about Spider-Carnage. We got sent to this world by mistake."

"Are you absolutely certain these two know anything at all?" Smythe asked.

"Spider-Carnage vanished into a time dilation portal just before the explosion of Crime Central,"
Hobgoblin said. "These two showed up just two days after. Coincidence? I think not!"

"Correlation is not necessarily causation," Smythe argued.

Kingpin held up a hand to silence Smythe. "Perhaps a few days locked in the cellblock without food or water will loosen their tongues."

"An excellent idea, Kingpin," the Green Goblin agreed. "Come, Hobgoblin, let's escort our guests to their new rooms."

"Move it!" Hobgoblin said, giving Steve a shove.

Steve gritted his teeth and resigned to kill Hobgoblin later if it was at all possible. After the Goblins escorted the two Overtakers out of the room, Smythe turned his attention back to Kingpin.

"Why are you indulging this nonsense?" Smythe asked. "Spider-Carnage is likely gone forever, and the chances of those two having encountered him are slim. The Goblins are insane and looking for any excuse to torture and shed blood."

"Exactly," Kingpin replied. "And if they are preoccupied with the strange visitors, that removes the eye of scrutiny from my actions. With them distracted, you and I can plot their destruction and finally start putting my city back together."

"I did warn you not to trust them or Spider-Carnage," Smythe reminded him. "We wouldn't be in the mess if you'd simply listened to me."

"If I listened to you every time you told me not to forge an alliance, I'd never have any allies!" Kingpin replied.

Smythe smirked. "And because of that, you'd probably be more successful."

The Goblins threw Steve and Daken into a cell together and took off cackling, vowing to return in time to torture the prisoners. Once the Goblins had left, presumably to go terrorize someone else, Steve attempted to summon the fairy light to his hands to unlock the iron door. However, the light simply sputtered out when Steve tried to summon it, and when Steve tried again, he couldn't muster so much as a glow. He could feel his vampiric strength fading as well. It was becoming rapidly apparent that reversing the Dragon Tooth spell had also nullified many of his vampiric abilities. Steve turned his glare onto Daken.

"Don't think for one second that I believe you didn't try to kill me," Steve said. "You either wanted me dead or wanted to get me paranoid enough to use the tooth. I don't know which one, but it's your fault we're in this fucking mess."

"My fault, huh?" Daken sneered. "Let's just conveniently ignore the fact that if it weren't for me, you'd be right in this same spot alone as a giant bat monster with no control of his faculties. Perspective. And are you of all people are really going to blame me for conspiring for power? That's a fucking riot, you hypocritical little bitch."

"I'm actually lookin' out for the good of the Overtakers as a whole!" Steve insisted. "You're just out for yourself!"

"Oh how noble of you," Daken scoffed. "I am so sorry, Mother Theresa. Your selfless sacrifice is truly beyond words."
"I never claimed that I didn't like power," Steve replied. "I wouldn't be on the Overtakers if that wasn't true. But I at least am looking out for the collective good of our team so that we can all get some power, including you, Daken."

"Right, because white people always just love to share their power, don't they?" Daken said. "And I'm just the uppity Asian kid for trying to fight for my seat at the table."

Steve groaned. "Why do you people always have to play the race card? This isn't about race!"

"Do you fucking hear yourself?" Daken replied with a harsh laugh that clearly wasn't born of any amusement. "Race card? You people? You know what, that's exactly my problem with you. You're just another entitled pretty white boy who thinks because he became a vampire and came out as gay that he suddenly understands what it's like to have the entire world against you. Well, guess-fucking-what? You were the world, and you, specifically you with your hate-group church, are the reason anyone who wasn't a straight white human had every ounce of power stripped away from them."

Steve was silent for a minute after that and didn't try to say anything else. He knew quite well that he used to be a right-wing hatemonger and an all around dick, but he'd always figured that those days were behind him completely and he didn't have to worry about it any more. But maybe the past for him wasn't as buried as he thought.

"You're right," Steve nodded. "I was that person, and I guess I still am even though I don't wanna be. My father raised me and beat into me and brainwashed me into seein' the world a certain way. And I've tried to put as much of him behind me as I could, but... I guess I've still got a lot of nasty habits to unlearn. And I'm not tryin' to make excuses or whatnot, but can't you understand what it's like to be groomed and abused to think and be a certain way?"

Daken thought back to a little boy left old in the snow with no clothes, to being forced to kill and kill and kill, to the rigorous "training" and experimentation Romulus put him through. He'd been molded to be one way and one way only.

"Yes, I can," Daken said softly.

"You too?" Steve asked.

"Yes," Daken nodded.

"Do you wanna talk about it?"

"No."

Steve sighed, leaned up against the cell wall and slid to the floor. "Well, either way, we're stuck now. Now we're gonna get nothing."

"Nothing," Daken repeated with sigh. "That word has defined my whole life. I've been a killer, a pawn, a 'good' guy, a 'bad' guy. This whole mortal coil has taught me that beyond absolute power, everything else is nothing."

Daken sat down next to Steve, and Steve gave his ally a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"I used to feel like that before I met Russell," Steve said. "He showed me that there was a whole wide world of stuff that I was missin'. Maybe... maybe you just need a Russell."

"I've never exactly been one for meaningful relationship bullshit," Daken said.
"Never too late to give it a try," Steve said with a shrug. "Well, I mean, I guess it kinda is too late now. Our survival is lookin' pretty... Wait. I just remembered hearing Kingpin saying that he and Smythe were in a similar position. What if they're just as much a prisoner of the Goblins as we are?"

"Hmm," Daken pondered this for a moment. "The Kingpin of my world was a builder of empires, not a destroyer of cities. If this guy's anything like the Kingpin who I'm familiar with, and I believe that he is, he probably hates this random destruction. That Smythe guy seemed the same. Think we can sway them?"

"We have to try," Steve said. "They might be our only chance. But they're not gonna stick their necks out for us without incentive."

"That part's not hard," Daken said. "My pheromones can get us half-way there, and consider this: Kingpin ran New York City's underworld in full daylight with no one able to touch him. The man's got a talent for controlling cities, and we just so happen to have a city that's not in ruins to offer him."

"Good idea! That might actually seriously help me too," Steve admitted.

"Unfortunately, the immediate problem still remains," Daken said, gesturing to the locked iron door. The sound of a guard pacing outside of their cell quickly changed both of their demeanors. Daken smirked, and Steve could smell the pheromones reeking off of him. They had their exit strategy.

As the Jolly Roger entered the Overtaken Kingdom's atmosphere, Cruella noticed Imperious lurking at the stern. At first she thought the sorcerer was simply fanning himself as he admired the view, but upon closer inspection, she realized that he was firing a blast of dark magic into the Etherium. The dark energy seemed to form an orb of darkness that just hung floating in the air where it landed. Cruella's eyesight wasn't what it used to be, but she thought she could also make out another dark orb a ways out from the last, almost as if he was leaving a trail of bread crumbs.

Cruella was about to go confront Imperious about whatever it was he was doing, but all thoughts of Imperious were quickly put out of mind when the Eminence Palace came into view and the Crystal of Ix containing Amuk Moonrah was hoisted onto the deck. The horrible ancient evil was even uglier up close. Even Cruella had no interest in making a fur coat out of Amuk's hideous mane (maybe a stole, though).

"You sure about this?" Russell asked.

"I am certain this is an option we must try," Maleficent answered.

"Now remember," Loki announced to the group. "When Amuk gets free, he's going to be absolutely furious, especially at me. He will destroy anyone in his path. Once he's out, warp through a Corridor of Darkness to a safe vantage point if you wish to live."

Everyone nodded in agreement and prepared to depart.

"IXTABOR!" Loki chanted.

Green light flashed, Corridors of Darkness flew, and a terrible roar echoed throughout the Overtaken Kingdom.

Amuk Moonrah was free again.
Traverse Town, The Moogles, and the Fairy Godmother are all from Kingdom Hearts.

Kingpin and Smythe are both from Spider-Man: the Animated Series. Just like the goblins and the world they're in, those two are the versions that appear in "I Really, Really Hate Clones"/"Farewell to Spider-Man".
Maleficent watched from the rooftop of Memory's Skyscraper as Amuk Moonrah destroyed the Eminence Palace. Through Hook's telescope, Maleficent could see Koragg and the Horned King struggling against Amuk's might, but, just like Mozenrath before them, they were no match for the ancient evil. But those two were merely the opening act. The real star of the show had yet to show his face, and Maleficent was starting to get antsy with worry that the Master might let Amuk demolish the entire Overtaken Kingdom before he stepped in.

"It'll work, babe," Hades said assuringly as if reading her thoughts.

"If it does not, then we have truly lost," Maleficent remarked. "Are the others safely inside the Skyscraper?"

"Yeah, I got everybody out like ya told me to," Hades answered. "Moving Grimmie and Winnie wasn't exactly the best idea, though. Those gals look like death, and, believe me, I know death. I see him in the mirror every morning when I brush my fangs."

"We will all perish if this fails," Maleficent stated. "We may not bear the appearance of death as they do, but make no mistake as to the severity of our situation."

"Oy, ever the doom and gloom?" Hades asked. "I mean, hey, that's why I like ya so much, but c'mon, have a lil' optimism here. The Master's gonna go down today, and then, badda-bing, we're back on track to ruling the cosmos!"

Maleficent saw from the telescope that Koragg and the Horned King retreated from the battle via Corridor of Darkness. She held her breath. They wouldn't have retreated like that if their Master wasn't on his way out. A flash of red light and swirls of darkness marked the Master's entrance into the battle. His tentacles writhed and red lightning crackled as he and Amuk Moonrah finally came face to hideous face.

It was show time.

The dungeons of Villain's Vale were full of the Overtakers' prisoners of war from the battle against Organization XIII. Of the thirteen vessels of Xehanort, only six remained in the prison. Luxord and Marluxia shared one cell, the former rendered a blank slate by Steve Newlin's glamour and the latter still living in Loki's delusion. In the next cell, Larxene, still crippled by excruciating self-doubt, was imprisoned alongside the still comatose Master Aqua. One cell over, Terra continued to share Aqua's fate, whilst his cellmate, Young Xehanort, still suffered from the energy drain to his chronal powers rendering him powerless.
The remnants of Xehanort were a sad and dismal sight that hardly warranted being guarded. Steve Newlin had been tasked with keeping an eye on them, but with his and Daken's disappearance, no one was around to enforce the guard duty (and Demyx certainly wasn't about to volunteer). And thus the six prisoners remained unguarded when a Corridor of Darkness deposited a black cloaked figured into the dungeons. Young Xehanort perked up immediately and grinned in recognition.

"So you've come back for us," Young Xehanort said. "I had wondered if our alliance truly amounted to anything. Release me, and we shall restore my future self to this world and begin anew."

"Yeah, not gonna happen," the cloaked figure said. "The old coot's master plan was an epic failure, and now I've got my own agenda to worry about."

"Then why have you come here?" Young Xehanort asked. "To rub salt into the wound that you remain free whilst the rest of us rot in these cells."

"Not quite," he said. "You see, I've got a little loyalty thing to work out the kinks on."

The cloaked figure held out his arm, and Xehanort's black and silver Keyblade, the "No Name," appeared in his hand. Young Xehanort squinted in suspicion at the teal blue eye adorning the tip and immediately recognized it as the true blade.

"What can I say?" he added. "I've always wanted to get me one of these!"

"So it did go to you," Young Xehanort remarked gravely.

"Yep! And that's why I'm here," the cloaked figure announced, waving the blade around when he gestured. "See, it still owes allegiance to Xehanort, and there's still six pieces of Xehanort's heart hangin' around. So I've gotta make sure that you go back to your original time and the other five here... well, I've gotta destroy the last five fragments of Xehanort's heart, now don't I?"

The cloaked figure fired a blast of darkness from his Keyblade that encircled Young Xehanort. The young man smirked and crossed his arms as he vanished back to his original time.

"This won't be permanent," Young Xehanort warned. "My future self will return again, and the Keyblade War will finally be reenacted."

"You? Return again?" the cloaked figure asked as Young Xehanort vanished into the darkness. "As if!"

"The Goblins have left the building again," Alistair Smythe announced as he walked into the office space that the Kingpin was using for a temporary base of operations. "We should be safe to speak freely."

"I thought they'd never leave!" Kingpin said with a sigh. "Curse Osborn for creating those two low-life lunatics! If he were still alive, I'd break him in two!"

"A fate he'd more than deserve after how he forced my father to stay inside that burning building," Smythe remarked coldly.

Kingpin's face grew grave at the mention of Smythe's father, and Smythe's cold fury was practically tangible. This was, of course, one of many realities. One such world had birthed a Peter Parker who had managed to rescue all of these tangential realities, but this world was not that Peter's point of origin, nor had it fully seen the effects of his work. Yet the history between Kingpin and Smythe had been similar to a point in both realities. Osborn had hired Spencer Smythe on Kingpin's behalf to
destroy Spider-Man, but that incident led to the alleged death of Spencer. In reality, Kingpin abducted Spencer and had him cryogenically frozen, a fact he hid from Smythe. After which, Kingpin had recruited Alistair Smythe to be his lieutenant, a partnership that lasted for years.

However, after a crippling fallout involving Kingpin's son and the discovery of Kingpin's involvement in Spencer's cryogenic freezing, Kingpin had Herbert Landon turn Smythe into the cyborg monster he was today. After that moment, he and Smythe spent years trying to destroy one another, with Smythe throwing in his lot with Kingpin's archenemy Silvermane. Yet the paths of the realities diverged there. After Kingpin was betrayed by Herbert Landon and Silvermane had Spencer Smythe killed, Kingpin and Smythe put aside their differences to destroy their common enemies.

The two supervillains still had a great deal of bad blood left hanging between them, but with the apocalyptic state of New York City thanks to Spider-Carnage, the two found that they still needed each other's comfortable presence in order to survive. But that didn't mean that all was forgiven.

"It is best not to harp on such things," Kingpin said coldly. "We must focus on destroying those Goblins! Have you successfully recreated Dr. Ohn's time dilation accelerator technology?"

"I am close to a break through," Smythe said. "The science needs a bit more testing before I am comfortable using it. If not, we could wind up stranded in limbo."

"I'd like to find a portal to limbo and throw the Goblins into it," Kingpin huffed.

"Sounds like we've got a common goal," Daken said as he and Steve entered the room.

"GUARDS! GUARDS!" Kingpin bellowed.

"Shhh! We only wanna talk," Steve said. "The four of us all want the same thing here, and you can trust us way more than you can trust the Goblins."

"I don't trust anyone," Smythe replied.

"Smart man," Daken said. "But hear us out anyway. We've actually got a pretty sweet deal for you two."

Kingpin scratched his chin and sat down at his desk, gesturing to the two chairs on the opposite side.

"You're not actually indulging this, are you?" Smythe asked. "After everything with Spider-Carnage and the Goblins?"

"It rarely hurts to listen," Kingpin shrugged. "If I do not like what they have to say, I can always have them destroyed."

Daken smiled. "I think you and I are gonna be friends, Kingpin."

The Master lashed out with his tentacles as Amuk Moonrah simply swiped them away with his claws. Amuk chortled loudly as he unleashed a barrage of fireballs that hit the Master square in the chest, knocking the beast backwards.

"Such powerful magic," the Master gurgled as he recovered. "I must have it!"

"Amuk will give you all of it!" Amuk threatened as he summoned two additional fireballs to his hands. "You shall burn until you are naught but a smear of ash on the ground!"

"Unlikely," the Master said with a laugh as tentacles sprouted from his mouth.
A funnel of energy extended from the Master's mouth and wisps of flame began to fly from Amuk Moonrah's body into the Master's mouth. Amuk quickly realized what was happening and attempted to fly away from the Master's magic absorption, yet he could not escape. Amuk's entire being tore apart at the seams, and soon all that was left of Amuk was crimson smoke and orange fire than was quickly sucked into the Master's gut.

"How deliciously filling," the Master announced after Amuk was no more. "It has been centuries since I have enjoyed so rich a-

The Master cried out in anguish as purple lightning sputtered around his body, delivering unto him immense pain.

"What is this?" the Master bellowed in fury.

In a flurry of green flames, Maleficent manifested a few yards away, smiling wickedly at the Master's pain.

"This is what happens to those who try to enslave the Mistress of All Evil," Maleficent announced.

"Maleficent! Traitor!" the Master growled.

"Precision, precision, my dear Master," Maleficent said. "To call me traitor implies that I ever had any loyalty to you."

A Corridor of Darkness opened to Maleficent's left and deposited Imperious.

"I, however, would more aptly fit the description of traitor," Imperious announced with a wicked laugh.

"IMPERIOUS!" the Master roared. "You're alive?"

"Alive and finishing what I started!" Imperious declared with a dramatic flick of his fan. "This curse is my own design. It takes all the magic you've ever consumed and turns it back against you! Your very sustenance is slowly destroying you!"

A second Corridor of Darkness manifested to Maleficent's right and unleashed Queen Grimhilde whose queenly veneer had been restored and who now had her old spark back.

"It also restored my magic to me!" Grimhilde revealed. "And I still owe you a reckoning for what you have done to me."

"This changes nothing!" the Master bellowed. "I will destroy all three of you for this insolence!"

"Ignacio!" Imperious called out.

Imperious twirled his fan around and extended it into a full out staff. It sparked with purple and black lightning. The Master attempted to swipe the staff from Imperious's hand with his tentacle, but the sorcerer unleashed the dark energy blast before the beast could stop him. The dark energy slammed into the Master's chest and threw him backwards through one of the still standing walls of the Eminence Palace.

"I would prefer if you did not further damage my castle," Maleficent sneered in disgust.

Maleficent quickly took on her dragon form, and the three Overtakers dashed over to where the Master had been sent hurdling. Through still irradiated with the curse, the Master had gotten back up
to his feet and his tentacles waved around threateningly.

"Do not be fooled by this moment of weakness," the Master warned. "I am far more powerful than any of you could ever DREAM!"

Imperious twirled his staff and prepared to unleash another blast of dark magic, but the Master was prepared this time. He opened his hideous maw and a stream of crimson energy fired outward, slamming directly into Imperious's hand. His staff flew in one direction, and Imperious tumbled in the other. The Master levitated in the air, this time directing his attention towards Maleficent. Green fire flickered from Maleficent's mouth in anticipation.

The Master's tentacles fired bolts of crimson energy at the dragon, but Maleficent swatted them harmlessly away with her wings. Maleficent then opened her mouth and unleashed the stream of emerald fire onto the Master. The Master spun around and encased himself in a shield of wind that protected him from the dragon's fire. The Master then opened his mouth to fire another blast of energy at the same time that Maleficent hurled a second jet of flames. The two blasts collided in midair with a shockwave that knocked the four villains backwards.

The Master, however, recovered from this quicker than his opponents. He quickly soared through the air to get behind Maleficent and hurled a blast of energy directly into the spot between her shoulder blades. Maleficent roared in pain as she stumbled forward. The Master cackled with fiendish glee.

"This is the feared Mistress of All Evil?" the Master asked. "I see a Mistress is far inferior to a MASTER!"

"Yet the Queen shall always be the queen," Grimhilde boasted with a twirl as she made her way to a platform on the Master's level.

"Do you have a death wish, hag?" the Master asked. "You should have stayed an old crone!"

The Master lashed out with his tentacles at Grimhilde, but she vanished before they could strike her. The Master looked all around for Grimhilde, but could not spot her. He scoffed, assuming that the wretched queen had simply retreated after her boast. Maleficent and Imperious were recovering for a second wave of attacks, and they would require his full attention. A painful jolt of magic struck the Master from below. He whirled around to see who had dared to attack him and saw Grimhilde standing there with a stream of magic pouring from her hands into him. Her cape and sleeves fluttered in the wind from the spell, but she held firm. The Master could feel that her spell was amplifying Imperious's curse to consume him faster. It took most of his strength to push back on this attack.

With the Master having no energy left to resist Maleficent and Imperious, the two Overtakers struck. Imperious unleashed another dark magical blast from his staff, and Maleficent unleashed another jet of green fire. The Master roared in agony as the three attacks tore into him. They were unrelenting, and in his weakened state, he could not stand against them. A retreat to break the curse and gather his strength in the darkness would be necessary if he hoped to survive, loathed though he was to retreat from anything. With his last jolt of strength, the Master opened a Corridor of Darkness.

"He is escaping!" Grimhilde cried out.

"No, he is not!" Imperious declared. "Aluía nullifico!"

With a swirl of magic, Imperious intercepted the Master's Corridor of Darkness, yet the beast still vanished before their eyes. Maleficent and Grimhilde ceased their attacks, and Maleficent returned herself to humanoid form.
"What has happened?" Maleficent asked as she stormed over to Imperious. "Where has he gone?"

"Oh you'll just love this part!" Imperious said with a sadistic laugh. "You see, when we departed from the Fabled Countryside, I left a little trail of breadcrumbs behind. Reflectonishio!"

At Imperious's command, his fan became a window to one of the dark orbs that Imperious had left out in the Etherium. The Master's Corridor of Darkness deposited him inside one of them. He roared in fury at the trap and lashed out at the interior with his tentacles.

"He is trapped and defenseless," Grimhilde said with a sinister smile. "Excellent!"

"That's not even the best part!" Imperious announced. "Keep watching!"

A dark shadowy shape descended upon the orb that trapped the Master. Maleficent squinted at the image and gasped when she saw what it was: the Chernabog. The Hellbeast had long sought out the heart with the greatest potential for darkness, and now he had found it. Chernabog's massive claw passed through the dark orb's exterior and reached into the Master's chest. The Master roared in agony as his heart was ripped from his chest, its red glow completely obstructed by clouds of black. The Chernabog chuckled deep and low as he greedily scarfed down the magical organ.

With his black heart destroyed and his body weakened by the curse, the Master cried out in agony and fury as he dissolved into the darkness, gone forever.

Across the vast reaches of the Etherium, in Hades's Underworld, another group of three watched as the Master met his undoing. Morgan le Fay, the evil sorceress who once tutored Doctor Doom in the ways of dark magic, scoffed in fury at the image.

"I thought the Master was supposed to be unbeatable!" she spat. "He was supposed to keep Victor and his foolish allies trapped forever! And now Victor and that horrid trickster god will be free to frolic about once more!"

This earned a sinister laugh from one of her allies: the demon Mephisto, father of the Overtaker Blackheart.

"You have quite a lot of bitterness towards Victor," Mephisto teased. "I truly hath no fury like that of a woman scorned."

"Does it not infuriate you that these Overtaker pests continue to thrive?" Morgan asked. "Our plan was perfect! And once again they have evaded our wrath!"

"Oh, Morgan, lighten up a bit," a deep voice bellowed from Hades's throne. "Not like we're down in the pits just yet... HA! Down in the pits! Get it? 'Cuz we're literally in the Underworld!"

"Yes, Lord Cronus, absolutely hilarious," Morgan said in a tone that conveyed that she found nothing funny about her superior's joke.

Cronus was the father of Hades and the other Olympian gods. He was a white-bearded blue-skinned man whose very flesh appeared to be the universe itself. Atop his head, he wore a golden helmet that conveyed his status as the king of the titans.

"All kiddin' aside, resurrectin' the Master was only a test run to get a feel for these allies that my boy has gotten along with," Cronus explained. "They'll get theirs soon enough, sweetheart, don't you worry. But we've got bigger and better things to worry about. I need you sharp and focused for what comes next."
"Of course, Lord Cronus," Morgan nodded. "You can depend on me."

"And me as well, of course," Mephisto chimed in. "I look forward to showing both of our treacherous sons the future we have in store for this universe!"

A Corridor of Darkness opened on the far side of the room, and the cloaked figure brandishing the No Name Keyblade stepped out.

"And now we're one step closer to that goal," the cloaked figure announced as he removed his hood, revealing his long gray and white ponytailed hair, eye patch, and smug grin.

"Xigbar! Glad you made it!" Cronus said. "I take it you patched up our little problem with the Keyblade? HA! Patched up!"

"Yeah, that one never gets old," Xigbar said in a tone of voice that betrayed that the joke did, in fact, get old. "The old coot's heart is finito, and his Keyblade's mine now!"

"That's my man!" Cronus proclaimed with a chuckle. "Can always count on him! Since you've got that ancient Keyblade, we're ready to move onto phase two of the plan."

Cronus's three associates greedily anticipated what was coming next. Cronus smiled with such an intensity that it was visible through his thick beard.

"We're goin' shoppin' for some gems."

Chapter End Notes

Kingpin and Smythe's history is the same as it is in Spider-Man: the Animated Series. Their reconciliation is my invention. Might expand on that story later.

Cronus is my OC interpretation of the Greek mythological figure who was only ever referenced in Hercules: the Animated Series. His personality is something of a proto-Zeus type deal. I'm also going to be borrowing some of Cronus's lore from Samurai Jack.
Maleficent supervised as the goblins and Heartless were hard at work putting the Eminence Palace back together again. Even after being a prisoner in her own home for a month, Maleficent still had no intentions of letting this castle go. On the contrary, now that it marked the site of not only Xehanort's defeat but the Master's as well, it was doubly important that she maintain it as a symbol of her strength.

Pete strolled up beside her and crossed his arms as he watched the reconstruction as well. "We've looked all over the Overtaken Kingdom, and there ain't no sign of Koragg or the Horned King. They musta hit the road when their boss went kablooey."

"No matter," Maleficent shrugged, in far too good a mood to be angry over such a triviality. "What are two insignificant ants compared to the might of the Overtakers?"

Pete laughed. "That's right! We'll run those two bozos outta all the worlds soon enough! Once we get our new plan all geared up! ... Uh, we do got a new plan, don't we?"

Maleficent's upper lip twitched. "Silence, fool! It is not your place to question me on such matters! You will know my glorious plan when I see fit to share it with you!"

Pete quickly apologized and made an excuse to run off in the other direction, fearful of Maleficent's wrath. Maleficent knew, however, that Pete would only be the first to ask, and the others would not be so easily dissuaded. She'd placed all her faith in the Book of Prophecies, and now that option was no longer on the table. She needed a new strategy to take over the worlds.

On one hand, her new plan could simply be the old plan. With Xehanort gone, she could try to take possession of Kingdom Hearts for herself and plunge all worlds into darkness. Yet, loathed though she was to admit it, that route had other complications. She wasn't prepared to wage a Keyblade war, and there were many things about Kingdom Hearts that Xehanort had either lied or misinformed her about. She had to admit that she didn't fully know what she was getting into.

There were other, more direct, routes to power out there in the multiverse. Maleficent just had to figure out what they were.

"A difficult question to contemplate, is it not?" Imperious asked as he strutted over to Maleficent. Maleficent sneered at him. "Your former Master is destroyed. You have no further reason to remain here. Return to your business, whatever it might be."

"Now I know I didn't just hear ingratitude lobed against the man responsible for setting you free," Imperious remarked.

Maleficent added. "You are treacherous, devious, and entirely too ambitious. I would be a fool to trust you to be inducted into our ranks."

"Fool or not, I think you'll find that I'm just the man you want by your side," Imperious said. "There are dark magics beyond even your understanding, o' Mistress of All Evil. But they're not beyond mine."
"Audacious, I see," Maleficent said with a smirk. "Very well, Imperious, you shall have your chance to stand amongst the Overtakers. However, should your loyalties ever come into question, trust that I will have you thrown into a black hole."

Imperious gave Maleficent a dramatic bow and took his leave. He would certainly be one to exercise caution around, but Maleficent couldn't deny that he had a certain charm to him. He would be useful to their cause, and if Maleficent had somehow managed to inspire loyalty from *Loki*, she was certain she could do the same with Imperious.

Loki and Doctor Doom, meanwhile, had retreated to their mansion in the world of Thedas, Chateau d'Onterre, for an evening away from the palace where they'd been imprisoned for a month and away from their proverbial cellmates, the other Overtakers. The two villains sat across from each other at the heads of the sizable dining room table, both dressed for dinner with Doom discarding his armor to simply be Victor von Doom. Though the Black Cauldron was presumably taken by the Horned King when he fled, Loki and Victor's staff of Cauldron Born servants remained to prepare and serve the feast.

"Victor, this spread is truly marvelous," Loki said as he admired the dishes laid in front of him. "Brings back memories of feasts back in Asgard."

"I oversaw the choice in menu personally," Victor replied. "Dishes of mutton, lamb, goat, and pork. Dried stockfish, eels, smelt, salmon, and winkles. And I assure you, finding good winkles this time of year is no easy feat."

"Oh indeed not," Loki said with a grin as he took a swig of wine. "I count myself impressed that you even knew what a winkle was."

"Doom knows all," Victor boasted before quickly adding, "... after having looked up what it was in our library."

"T'is truly a noble effort to replicate Asgardian cuisine," Loki said as he sampled his winkle. "Which leads me to wonder why you've gone to such trouble."

"I should think that would be obvious," Victor said without looking up from cutting his pork. "It is a celebratory feast now that we are free from the Master's tentacles. If we dined upon the same meal as we always did, it would not be a *celebratory* meal, would it?"

Loki shot Victor a knowing expression that told him that he didn't buy that answer for a second. Sometimes Victor hated dating a god of lies. Nothing slipped past him.

"I merely wished to show you that I listened to you when you complained of the Midgardian meals in the Eminence Palace," Victor relented. "Can one not make a sentimental gesture without having to bask in it?"

"Oh of course *one* may," Loki said with a smirk. "But you never do anything without reason, and I wish to hear you say why."

Victor groaned and set down his silverware. He should have known that a lie by omission would still be lie enough even with the actual truth laid bare.

"You obviously believe you know the answer already," Victor said.

"Yes, but I wish to hear it from you," Loki replied.
"This was clearly a mistake," Victor said as he wiped his mouth and rose from his chair. "If gestures cannot simply speak for themselves, then I have little interest in continuing to make them."

"You're concerned that I intend to leave you and the other Overtakers," Loki stated. It was not a question.

"And should I not be?" Victor asked. "You did say very clearly after the Book of Prophecies plan fell through that you had little interest in continuing to dally about play acting as a team. With the Master gone, you now have the freedom to act upon that desire to abandon the Overtakers."

"And you thought food might change my mind?" Loki asked with a smirk.

"A small gesture to show that your words are heard and your desires valued," Victor explained. "Yet now the gesture has been spoiled, and there is little point in continuing to dwell upon it."

"If you wish me to stay, all that you need do is ask," Loki said.

"You know what I want," Victor said as he donned his armor once more to once again become Doctor Doom.

"Yes, but I want you to say the words."

"Doctor Doom does not beg."

"I did not ask you to beg. Precision, my dear Victor."

"Words to you are naught but another form of power and control."

"So true, and that is precisely why I value them more than I do a gesture. Do you wish me to stay enough to humble yourself to ask? Or is my presence merely one that is only desired in so long as it does not require you to grant me anything of substance?"

Doom sighed. As much as these games frustrated him, they also were a part of Loki that he knew he could never change. In a strange way, that endeared him to them. They were the only times when Doom felt he could humble himself, for whatever that was truly worth.

"Very well," Doom said. "Loki, I wish for you to stay with the Overtakers... and with me."

Loki grinned smugly and gave a dramatic bow. "As you wish."

Russell wasted no time warping back to Villain's Vale to see Steve. His Corridor of Darkness manifested itself in the Vale longue so quickly that it startled Demyx, almost causing him to spill his plate of food all over the floor.

"I could have dropped my croissant!" Demyx whined.

"Where's Steve?" Russell asked before turning even more fierce. "Where's Daken?"

"No, 'Hey Demyx! How ya doing? Great to see you, man!'?" Demyx asked. "Fine, I see how it is. I'm just the chicken who nobody wants around."

Russell swiftly snatched Demyx by his coat's collar, hoisting the young man up over his head. Demyx yelped at Russell's sudden action.

"One more time," Russell said, baring his fangs. "Where. Is. Steve?"
"I don't know, I haven't seen either of them in days!" Demyx said quickly. "Steve turned himself into some freaky bat thing with a dragon tooth, and Daken went to go turn him normal. That was the last I saw of either of them. Nobody came home after that."

"And you didn't think to go looking for them?" Russell asked, his rage causing his accent to switch from his usual Southern drawl into his original Germanic accent that he had before moving to America.

"It seemed like too much effort," Demyx said. "I didn't really wanna go, and nobody asked me, so I didn't."

"You are fuckin' useless!" Russell growled as he hurled Demyx back down onto the sofa and darted out of the room.

Queen Grimhilde admired her reflection in the Magic Mirror. It felt wonderful to have her radiant beauty restored once more. The Master's spell had thankfully not left any permanent scars that a little bit of magical lotion couldn't erase. Grimhilde was truly the fairest one of all, and she didn't care how many other women she had to murder to ensure that she remained unchallenged in her beauty.

"Somebody's a happy girl," Cruella's sultry voice said as she approached the mirror.

"Would not you be as well had you just regained the face that made you the Fairest One of All?" Grimhilde asked.

"Darling, I'm already the Fairest One of All," Cruella quipped.

Grimhilde shot her a venomous glare. "Watch yourself. I have killed for less."

"I only jest," Cruella added quickly. "In actuality, you truly are the Fairest One of All."

"Oh, I will be very soon," Grimhilde announced with half-smile. "Very soon indeed."

Cruella was about to say more when Russell burst into the chamber, startling the two women. Grimhilde quickly regained her composure and crossed her arms. Her ally seemed very visibly distraught.

"I need you to use your mirror," Russell said, his original Germanic accent still slipping through. "NOW! You owe me for the time I was trapped inside it!"

"For what purpose?" Grimhilde asked, raising her eyebrow.

"To find Steve!" Russell said with an exasperated tone as if that were the most obvious answer in the world.

Grimhilde was curious about Russell's current state, and the villainous part of her thought about exploiting his distraught state in exchange for a favor. However, she quickly thought better of it. Russell was stronger and more powerful than her. If he wanted to force her, he could. His gratitude would be more valuable than a coerced favor. Grimhilde summoned the spirit of the mirror, a somber theater mask with green and purple lighting shining upon it from various angles.

"What wouldst thou know, my queen?" the mirror asked.


"Across dimensions to a world most dire," the mirror answered, "To a New York City that has been
"Can he be more specific?" Russell asked. "Coordinates or somethin'?"

"I'm afraid that is all that he can tell you," Grimhilde stated. "But that may prove to be all that you need. With your connection to Steve Newlin and the image of a city in flames in your mind, the Corridors of Darkness should do the rest."

Russell nodded. "Thanks. You've been a big help."

Without another word, Russell vanished into the darkness.

Fish Mooney was wrapped in furs dyed magenta and red from head to toe, and she was still freezing cold. When Ursula invited Fish to come along to Atlantica to look for Ursula's treacherous sister Morgana, Fish assumed they'd go somewhere warm and tropical underwater as mermaids. Instead, however, they were rifling through Morgana's above water ice cave.

"How are you not freezing, Ursula?" Fish asked. "If my shoulders were bare in this temperature, I'd drop dead."

"Mermaid biology is different from humans, Angelfish," Ursula said as she rifled through her sister's cabinets, looking for any clues as to where she might've gone. "We're made for living in the fathoms below where the sun doesn't shine. Cold temperatures are hardly an inconvenience."

"I'm officially jealous," Fish declared. "Have you found anything that'll point us in the right direction?"

"Nothing yet," Ursula said. "Just a bunch of second rate potions... Oh! What have we here?"

Ursula held up a pink bottle with her face etched onto the side. "I had wondered where this bottle of my magic went. That old skank! Never was a good enough witch on her own."

"Well compared to you, how could she be?" Fish asked as she walked over and gave her girlfriend a kiss on the cheek. "I'm lucky that I'm learning from the best."

"And don't you forget it either!" Ursula added with a chuckle.

Fish strolled over to another shelf of knick-knacks that all seemed uninteresting. However, a single object stood out: a round framed portrait depicting an elderly woman who resembled a skinnier version of Ursula standing with two young girls, presumably Morgana and Ursula. The portrait's label indicated that Ursula had won first place in some competition. Fish smiled at the smug confidence that Ursula exuded in her portrait even back then, but it was impossible not to notice Morgana pouting a bit at Ursula's victory.

After a quick glance to the left, Fish noticed another picture of Ursula hung up on Morgana's wall. This one depicted Ursula closer to the way she looked now. The most noteworthy thing about the picture, however, was that several razor sharp starfish had been thrown into it as if the picture were a dart board.

"Your sister clearly has some resentment issues," Fish remarked. "What'd you do to her."

"Why do you automatically assume that I did anything to her?" Ursula asked.

Fish shot Ursula a knowing glance and raised her eyebrow. The meaning in the gesture was plain.
"Okay, point taken," Ursula said with a chuckle. "But this time I actually didn't do anything to her... aside from being our mother's favorite daughter. It's hardly my fault that mummy loved me and not her."

"What was your mother like?" Fish asked.

Ursula scratched her chin as if she were unsure as to how to answer that question. "Now how shall I put this... she was a... severe woman. In every meaning of the word. She had expectations and rules and you followed them... if you didn't, well... you just did with her. Actually, now that I think about it, Maleficent reminds me of her, and I'm not sure how I never noticed that."

"That would explain why you're always so eager to please Maleficent," Fish pointed out.

"I suppose it does," Ursula remarked. "It was only the three of us back then: me, her, and Morgana. Pretty sure she turned daddy into a shrimp and gobbled him up when we were little. Anyway, we were always poor like the other Octopins, living like worms whilst the merpeople of Atlantica sang and danced all day. Oh how it disgusted my mother how much the Atlanticans hoarded for themselves. She pushed us so hard to be powerful enough to take everything that Atlantica had for ourselves. I rose to the challenge; Morgana never did."

"Must've been hard," Fish commented.

Ursula shrugged. "It made me the powerful and stunning woman I am today. Can't complain."

"True enough," Fish said. "You and I both became strong because of how we grew up. Something else we have in common."

"Gotham and Atlantica didn't deserve either of us," Ursula added.

A crumpled up piece of paper on the floor suddenly caught Ursula's attention. It was hardly unusual for Morgana to leave garbage around, but the paper wasn't the seaweed reed parchment used in Atlantica.

"What's that?" Ursula pondered out loud as one of her tentacles snagged up the paper.

Ursula uncrumpled the paper to find that it was an advertisement poster for something called The Struggle. What Morgana's interest in such an event would be, Ursula couldn't even begin to guess. What did catch Ursula's eye was the location printed on the flyer: Twilight Town. Ursula grinned and held the paper up so that Fish could see.

"Looks like we've got a lead," Ursula explained.

The Jolly Roger soared through the sea between worlds. The winds of the Etherium tussled Hook's hair as they flew around asteroids and gummi masses. Hook was just thrilled to get some fresh air away from the Overtaken Kingdom. His little excursion to the Fabled Countryside hadn't quite scratched his itch for adventure and freedom. When Jafar suggested a treasure hunt earlier, Hook had practically jumped at the chance.

"Take us two notches to starboard," Jafar bellowed as he studied the cosmic atlas.

"Aye, two notches to starboard," Hook echoed as he did so. "Remind me again what this treasure is. You mentioned it was a sphere?"

"A Treasure Sphere, yes," Jafar answered. "It's a type of technology once utilized by Etherium
pirates such as Captain Nathaniel Flint. It's essentially a cache used to hoard pirate loot away from prying eyes."

"Well I for one prefer the old fashion way," Hook remarked. "Burying treasure is a far more elegant process than stuffing it in some globular mechanism."

Jafar scoffed at that. "As I was saying, the contents of a given Treasure Sphere are not exactly advertised, though the usual content consists of gold, gummi materials, and other valuables."

"And that interests you how?" Hook asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You've heard of the golden rule, haven't you?" Jafar asked. "Whoever has the gold makes the rules."

"You seem to have the misguided notion that you can bluff directly to my face," Hook said. "I'm a pirate, mate. A pirate who's seen you disrobed, I might add. You know the old phrase: naked men have no secrets."

"Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to tell you my true quarry," Jafar pondered. "This particular Treasure Sphere contains loot pilfered from a nearby world, and I believe that this cache holds the powerful weapon of a demigod, a fish hook."

Hook cocked his eyebrow and raised up the hook in place of his left hand in response. "If all you desire is a hook, I'm amenable to sharing the use of mine."

"This fish hook is a much more powerful artifact than your sentimental prosthetic," Jafar explained. "And it shall be mine!"

Jafar cackled wickedly at his declaration.

"Might I inquire as to why you evil sorcerer types feel the need to laugh maniacally after everything?" Hook asked.

"Well... it punctuates my evil," Jafar answered. "It's a flourish!"

With that answered, the evil sorcerer immediately returned to his sinister laugh. Hook shrugged and kept his eyes on the horizon. Something gold and metallic caught his eye off in the distance. As the ship approached closer and closer, he saw that it was a round orb with etchings and various moving panels adorning the exterior. It had to be the Treasure Sphere that Jafar spoke of. Hook anchored the ship to a nearby gummi cluster and joined Jafar at the bow of the ship looking out at the Treasure Sphere.

Jafar extended his arms outward and began to chant. "Zimba zamba zalaboo!"

Bright red magic spiraled out from the head of the serpent staff and engulfed the Treasure Sphere, irradiating the metal disks that acted as pressure points to open the cache. Hook and Jafar looked on in anticipation as the Treasure Sphere opened to reveal....

"WHAT?" Jafar growled. "HOW CAN IT BE EMPTY?"

"I've been sold many a tall tale by seaport scallywags that promised a great treasure," Hook said. "An empty cache is not exactly an unforeseeable outcome."

"No, no, NO!" Jafar spat. "I am CERTAIN this is the cache that held Maui's fish hook and a great mountain of gold and jewels! Someone got to it first... But who?"
"Does it truly matter?" Hook asked. "They've come and gone, and there are other treasures to seek."

Jafar shot Hook a venomous glare. "Where is your sense of outrage and determination? You who spent there better part of three centuries in pursuit of revenge?"

"You care that deeply for a magic fish hook?" Hook asked.

"It's not about the hook itself," Jafar answered. "It's the principle of the matter. I desired the hook, and it was denied to me. That can never be allowed to stand."

"Well, as you said, I spent centuries in search of vengeance," Hook stated. "A revenge that still remains unsated. Even my symbolic vengeance against the Beast failed spectacularly. I've often wondered if the principle of the matter ever truly mattered. Why should I have any drive when everything I want always ends up slipping through my fingers? Is there really any point in wanting anything?"

Jafar was about to inform Hook just how utterly foolish he found that line of thinking, but Hook continued to speak before Jafar got the chance.

"And the answer is yes," Hook continued. "The principle of the matter is the only thing worth anything. If you feel slighted by the theft of this fish hook, then we simply must make this thief taste cold steel."

Jafar beamed at that. "You had me worried for a moment there. Not everyone can bounce back from failure quite so effectively. I knew I saw in you an equal in determination."

Jafar tapped the base of his staff on the deck and cast a Corridor of Darkness in front of them.

"Come," Jafar beckoned. "The hourglass back in my laboratory should reveal to us the one who has stolen that which is rightfully ours."

The Corridor of Darkness deposited Hades, Maleficent, and Blackheart along the banks of the Styx, looking out at the Underdrome. With the uncertain state of the Underworld's current management, they dared not teleport in any deeper, lest they find themselves captured by a hostile occupying force.

"My palace is down the road a bit through the big blue iron doors over there," Hades said. "Then it's just a hop, skip, and a jump over the River Styx and through the woods to grandmother's house we go."

Maleficent held out her hand to signal for her companions to wait a moment. "It would be best for one of us to scout ahead a bit first. If there are any traps along the path, we should be aware of them before our entire procession presses onward."

"I'll take care of it, mommy," Blackheart said as he walked forward.

"I am not your mother," Maleficent snapped. "You shall not address me as such."

Blackheart put on a pouty face and turned to Hades. "Daddy, mommy's being a bitch again."

"Don't press your luck with her, kid," Hades warned. "Go, do your job."

Blackheart winked at Hades and proceeded forward through the gates.

"What was that all about?" Maleficent asked.
"Eh, Mephisto really skimped out on that kid's education," Hades explained. "We had nothing better to do when the Master put us under house arrest, so I figured I'd show him some of the ol' Lord of the Dead ropes. He says he calls me 'daddy' to annoy me, but I think he actually does it 'cuz he's starved for a father who values him. And, hey, y'know, I've really discovered the joys of teaching."

"That is a feeling I know well," Maleficent said with a nod. "Would that Riku were as an enthusiastic pupil as your Blackheart."

"Always happy to share him," Hades shrugged. "He does kinda have the best of both our worlds when ya get right down to it."

Maleficent shook her head. "When next I take on an apprentice, it will be with a pointed goal in mind."

"Speakin' of, hope ya don't mind, but, uh, what exactly is our new goal?" Hades asked. "The Book of Prophecies thing was a bust, and that door is closed and bolted shut. Sooo... what now?"

Maleficent's first instinct was to respond to Hades the way that she did to Pete, but she knew that Hades was her closest confidant. He deserved to know the truth, and maybe he could even help remedy the situation.

"I do not yet know," Maleficent admitted. "The Book of Prophecies is not the only path to power, but it was one that I counted on. Now I will need time to craft a new course of action, time that I do not have with the anticipating glances of the other Overtakers baring down on me."

"This is just a shot in the dark here, but have you ever considered Pandora's Box?" Hades asked. "Powerful plagues of ancient evil that mortals are particularly susceptible to. Could come in handy holding some worlds for ransom."

"I shall take it under consideration," Maleficent nodded in thanks.

As she did, the Cave of the Dead's gates opened once again. Blackheart stepped through, escorting a strangely dressed man that Maleficent had never seen before. The man's face, however, seemed to light up at the sight of Hades.

"Fancy meeting you here!" the man called out with a curt little wave.

"I found this old guy wandering around," Blackheart explained. "He says he's dead, but he doesn't exactly have the same complexion as the locals."

"Now, now, one should never judge another's honesty based on the translucency of their skin... or lack thereof," the man said with a coy smirk.

"It's okay, Blackheart, let 'im go," Hades said. "This guy's Ardyn Izunia, the guy who hooked us up with the ink for the Book of Prophecies. I gave him an optional Get Outta Underworld Free card in exchange for it. Though, uh, Ardyn, babe, if you were gonna use it, it's a Get Outta Underworld Free card, not a Come Back to Life and Just Hang Out in the Underworld Free Card. Capiche?"

"Oh, of course, accept my humblest apologies," Ardyn said with a courteous bow. "My curiosity was merely piqued when I arrived, and I wished only to see who was in charge of this kingdom in your absence. I was on my way back out when your charming son grabbed me."

Blackheart beamed with pride at having convinced a total stranger that he was Hades and Maleficent's son. Maleficent just rolled her eyes.
"Did you find out who's been Goldilocksing in my house?" Hades asked.

Ardyn nodded. "Mind you, I'm terrible with names, but there were four most unfriendly fellows. I only managed to catch the name of their leader. Does the name 'Lord Cronus' mean anything to you?"

Hades's blood ran cold, and he became far more rigid and tense than Maleficent had ever seen him.

"This could prove to be more difficult than even the Master," Maleficent said to Hades.

"Wait, hold on a minute," Blackheart said. "Somebody wanna explain who Cronus is and why daddy's so freaked out."

Hades's usual devil-may-care swagger was completely gone. Now it was only a tense fear and rage left in his words.

"Cronus is my dad."

Chapter End Notes

Treasure Spheres are from Kingdom Hearts III. Maui's Fish Hook is from Moana.
Breaking at the Brick of Every Wall

JCMorrigan didn't reign in my lack of impulse control for this chapter, so there's actually two musical numbers in it. It's a good idea to be familiar with "The Greatest Show" from The Greatest Showman and "Shiny" from Moana. I hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the threat of Cronus looming over their heads, Maleficent, Hades, and Blackheart returned to the Eminence Palace immediately to regroup. Ardyn Izunia, having nowhere else better to go, opted to come with them. Maleficent and Hades invited Ardyn to the castle lounge for tea and coffee while they discussed what to do. Grimhilde and Imperious, intrigued by the newcomer, joined them.

"Tell me your story Ardyn," Maleficent said as she poured a cup of tea and handed it to him. "If we are to be allies, I wish to understand who you are."

"Of course, m'lady, and thank you," Ardyn said as he took the tea. "Where shall I begin? I suppose at the very beginning. My home world, Eos, was ravaged by an incurable blight of darkness known as the Starscrouge that twisted men and beasts alike into horrible daemons."

"Was the scourge connected to the Heartless?" Grimhilde asked.

"Hard to say," Ardyn said with a shrug. "I suspect all darkness is connected in the end, but we're getting off topic already. You see, I possessed a certain special gift granted to me by a treacherous crystal that empowered the Lucian kings: the ability to cure the afflicted by taking the darkness into my own being. I was a savior to our people, but my jealous brother demonized and ostracized me, branding me a daemon as well. He went on to sire a dynasty of kings, whilst I was cursed to wander my world for all eternity."

"Oy vey, brothers, am I right?" Hades said with a sigh. "Can't live with 'em; can't TORCH them in their sleep or mom'll be pissed. I have a high and mighty jerk of brother too, who, coincidentally, also got to become king whilst I got made a pariah. You've got my sympathies, babe."

"Most appreciated," Ardyn said with a nod as he sipped his tea. "Now where was I? Ah yes! I wandered for centuries, longing for my revenge against my brother's bloodline, but not just any Lucian King would do. No, the end of my brother's bloodline had to come with the death of a king chosen by the same crystal that rejected me in favor of my brother. I took some waiting and arranging, but finally one came about: King Noctis. He entered the crystal and remained there for ten years, during which I waited patiently. After nine years and nine months, your Overtakers arrived on my doorstep."

"Hades told me you were lying in wait for an enemy," Maleficent said. "This... Noctis, I assume?"

"Indeed so," Ardyn nodded.

"And what became of him," Imperious asked. "Though, need I truly ask? Given where you ended up, I'd say you failed miserably."
Ardyn did not become enraged at that remark; he merely smirked. "Best not to make assumptions before the story is done. Noctis did indeed return for our final showdown: the battle of kings! After a glorious battle indeed, he sacrificed his own life to slay me and cure our world of the darkness. Even in death, I was granted my ultimate desire: the end of my brother's dynasty and the end of the power of the crystal. I had thought to remain at peace afterwards, yet Hades's gift to me was too delicious an opportunity to pass up: a world in which my hated rival is dead and I can begin anew."

"Begin anew with what, exactly?" Grimhilde asked, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

"Is it not obvious?" Ardyn asked as he propped his feet up on the coffee table. "I have been cured of the Starscourge and born anew. My brother's dynasty has come to an end. Now it's time for mine to begin. Alongside the Overtakers, of course."

"And why should any of us trust you?" Imperious asked.

"I owe my new beginning to Hades," Ardyn explained. "I'm more than happy to repay my gratitude in loyalty."

Imperious scoffed. "Don't tell me you actually trust this vagabond, Maleficent!"

"More so than I do you," Maleficent replied. "Welcome to the Overtakers, Ardyn Izunia. Your new dynasty shall begin very soon, but first we must attend to Cronus."

"Oh yes, attend to a titan king more powerful than the Master whilst we're all still catching our breath," Imperious said with a scoff. "What sound logic you have, Maleficent."

Maleficent was about to scold Imperious for his remark, when Grimhilde interrupted her before she could speak.

"Mistress, if I may," Grimhilde chimed in. "Perhaps gathering our strength is the best course of action at present. Take the power we can whilst we prepare to deal with our enemies. There is a particular target I wish to pursue, and time is of the essence. Should all go according to plan, I will be able to kill that meddlesome Sora for you in the process."

Maleficent nodded. Grimhilde's request was a reasonable one, and it would buy Maleficent time to devise a new goal to grant them control of all worlds. Maleficent, however, hated to be questioned, and the thought of letting Imperious believe he had a point infuriated her. However, desperate times called for swallowing one's pride... if only for a moment.

"Very well," Maleficent said with a nod. "We shall gather whatever power we can manage for now. The worlds require a reminder of the wrath of the Overtakers. Let us see that they get one."

Fish and Ursula arrived at the world known as Twilight Town, following the lead they received from the struggle flyer left in Morgana's cave. However, for a world known as Twilight Town, it had certainly taken a turn for the darker. The sky was no longer twilight but, rather, midnight, and the buildings that had once been painted oranges and reds to match the sunset had been done over in royal blues and sickly greens. The roads all seemed to now be covered in a sheet of black sand. Shambling undead Mamlucks patrolled the streets as something of a city watch.

To avoid drawing too much attention to themselves, Ursula had taken on her Vanessa disguise and Fish was dressed in one of her more neutral colored outfits (though it was hardly subtle, as nothing in Fish's closet qualified for that particular label). The two women strolled through the Tram Common of Market Street, where, despite the aesthetic changes, citizens were still going about their usual business. It was as if nothing had truly disrupted anyone's daily routine.
"Those are definitely Mozenrath's Mamlucks," Fish whispered to Ursula.

"Without a doubt," Ursula agreed. "My old prune of a sister must've gone running to him after the World That Never Was battle."

"Think he'll be a threat to the Overtakers?" Fish asked.

"He's gotten in our way before," Ursula said. "If he managed to conquer this world, he might just have the means to give us a run for our money."

"We should see if one of the locals could tell us something more," Fish said.

Fish scanned the crowd for an easy target and her eyes landed on a young man with slicked back blonde hair who was playing on his phone.

"Excuse me, sir," Fish said as she waved the young man down. "Hello there, my name is Maria, and this is my friend Vanessa."

"I'm Biggs," the young man said with a polite smile.

"We're from... out of town, and I'm afraid we're not very up to date on what's going on here," Fish said. "Didn't this use to be Twilight Town? What happened?"

Biggs's polite smile faded away almost instantly, and he began to talk in hushed tones. "You ladies are from outside? How'd you get past the perimeter?"

"Well...," Fish began. "You see...."

"I'm something of an amateur sorceress," Ursula whispered so that only Fish and Biggs could hear. "I teleported us here through my magic."

Biggs's eyes widened. "So does that mean... you could get people out?"

"Possibly," Ursula replied with a shrug. "But we need to know what's going on here first."

"Right, right," Biggs said. "Well, this evil wizard guy named Mozenrath showed up here with the Sorcerer's Society, a team of villains with some crazy dangerous powers. He took over everything on this side of the train tracks, and he would've taken over all of Twilight Town if Roxas and Naminé hadn't stopped him from expanding into Sunset Terrace. Most of the Sorcerer's Society are off fighting Roxas at the perimeter, but Mozenrath himself stays cooped up in the old mansion."

"Who all is on this... Sorcerer's Society?" Fish asked.

"Umm... I don't really know all their names," Biggs admitted. "There's a woman with swords, a guy with a dragon skull helmet, some flying wolves, the witch who's building herself a temple on the Sandlot, and this freaky octopus lady too!"

"Morgana," Vanessa said under her breath.

"The witch sounds like Hecate," Fish added, "and the sword woman must be Miratrix. Don't know who the man in the dragon skull could be. He must be new."

"Oh! And there's also the theater cast, the Mysterious Players" Biggs added.

"Mysterious Players?" Fish asked. "Who are the Mysterious Pl-"
A loud bell began to ring, interrupting Fish's question. Everyone on the streets seemed to be gravitating to a single area of the Tram Common.

"You're about to find out," Biggs said. "It's the mandatory daily theater show. Don't let the Mamlucks catch you skipping. They'll throw you in the jail for a week."

Biggs led Fish and Ursula over to a large outdoor amphitheater. The stage area had a large banner overhead with big green bold letters that read:

THE QUENTIN BECK ARENA OF EXTRAVAGANZA

"Quentin Beck?" Ursula said out loud. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

Fish shrugged. "No clue. I've never heard of him."

Twin spotlights scanned over the crowds as a deep announcer voice boomed through the loud speakers.

"Welcome to the Quentin Beck Arena of Extravaganza! Thank you for joining us today for the mandatory daily performance of the Mysterious Players! Please silence your cellphones and absolutely NO flash photography. And now, without further ado... The Mysterious Players!"

In a plume of smoke, seven figures appeared, all dressed in identical clothing: green body armor, purple capes, and silver fish bowl esque helmets. Fish and Ursula's jaws dropped as they realized exactly where they'd heard Quentin Beck's name before.

"Did you even notice that Mysterio was missing?" Fish asked.

"Honestly, I forgot all about him," Ursula admitted.

The seven illusions of Mysterio all held out their arms, gesturing to center stage. The twin spotlights locked on the location that the illusions were gesturing towards as the booming announcer voice spoke back up.

"And now, please give a warm welcome to your host with the most, QUENTIN BECK!"

A plume of smoke erupted center stage as Quentin Beck appeared to the sound of raucous applause that didn't seem to be coming from anyone in the audience. Beck, unlike his backup illusions, was not dressed as Mysterio. Instead, Beck was sporting a green and purple spiral patterned sequins suit and his black hair spiked up with green and purple streaks dyed into it.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Beck said as he bowed to his "adoring" public. "Your undying love and support truly means the world to me! But then again... who could blame you? I'm simply the most WONDERFUL thing that has ever graced your boring town with my presence. But now, I want you all to give a great big hand to the SECOND most wonderful thing to grace your boring town: my lovely assistant, MADAME FROU FROU!"

Again applause came from nowhere as a second plume of smoke deposited Madame Frou Frou next to Beck. Even from the back row, Fish could tell that "Madame" Frou Frou was a man in drag, but no one in the audience seemed to notice or mind. If anything, they all seemed bored and thoroughly uninterested. Frou Frou was sporting a gown that matched Beck, but hers was more muted and less sparkly so as to not upstage the attention whore-in-chief.

"And now, Twilight Town," Beck said as he slipped on a pair of golden rimmed sunglasses. "I bid you all welcome... to the Greatest Show!"
Music suddenly began to play, and the Mysterio backup performers began to sing with drawn out "woahs."

"Ladies and gents, this is the moment you've waited for," Beck began to sing.

"You've been searching in the dark," Madame Frou Frou sang along with a thick accent that seemed to be a strange bastardization of French and Hungarian. "Your sweat soaking through the floor."

"And buried in your bones is an ache that you can't ignore," Beck sang. "Takin' your breath."

"Stealing your mind," Frou Frou added.

"And all that was real is left behind!" the two sang in harmony.

"Don't fight it, it's comin' for you, runnin' at ya," Beck sang as he ran across the stage.

"It's only this moment, don't care what comes after," Frou Frou sang with a wag of her finger.

"Your fever dream, can't you see it gettin' closer?" Beck said as his illusions morphed into some strange monster that could only have been imagined during a fever dream.

"Just surrender 'cause you feel the feeling taking over!" Frou Frou sang with an intense glare at the audience as if it were an order.

Beck slid back to center stage from the next verse. "It's fire!" A jet of green flames burst next to him at the music's beat. "It's freedom!" The illusion of a giant chain breaking in the background. "It's floodin' open!" A jet water seemed to propel Beck into the air.

"It's a preacher in the pulpit," Frou Frou sang as the Mysterio illusions all took on the appearance of nuns behind her, "and your blind devotion."

"There's somethin' breakin' at the brick of every wall," Beck sang as the illusion of a brick wall crumbled behind him.

"It's holdin' all that you know," Frou Frou sang.

"So tell me do you wanna GO?" they sang in unison.

Now both of them sang together with the Mysterio backup singers singing along with them.

"Where it's covered in all the colored lights." The entire stage began to look like a bowl full of skittles. "Where the runaways are runnin' the night. Impossible comes true; it's takin' over you."

"Oh, this is the greatest show!" the Mysterio singers proclaimed by themselves.

"We light it up, we won't come down," Beck and Frou Frou jumped back in as the illusion of a giant sun appeared over them and quickly faded out. "And the sun can't stop us now! Watchin' it come true; it's takin' over you..."

"Oh, this is the greatest show!" the Mysterio singers repeated over and over until Beck and Frou Frou jumped back in for one final echo and fireworks went off behind them to commemorate the end of the musical number.

The audience burst into applause... or at least, the illusion of them doing so did. Beck and Frou Frou blew kisses to their "fans" as the illusions of flowers being thrown on stage showered them to feed their egos.
Fish leaned over to Ursula and whispered, "I think we've seen enough. Let's get out of here before they do an encore."

Jafar's hourglass revealed the identity of the thief who had beaten them to the Treasure Sphere containing Maui's fish hook. That was why Jafar and Hook now found themselves traversing the bioluminescent wonderland of Lalotai, the realm of monsters in the Sea of Te Fiti, the very world in which the fish hook originated.

"There's so many wonderous colors down here," Hook remarked. "In all my years of voyaging, I've never gazed upon anything so prismatic."

"The colors are a trap," Jafar warned. "A useful tool to draw unsuspecting prey into an early grave. Do be sure not to touch anything."

Jafar pressed onward, and Hook followed after him. However, after walking several paces down the selected path, something caught Hook's eye. Sitting there, just off the beaten path, was a beautifully decorated treasure chest painted with pinks and blues and brilliant golds. Hook glance up at the ocean water overhead, and figured that such wonderous treasure must've been lost overboard from a ship. Hook shrugged, figuring that their loss was his gain, and knelt down to pry open the lock.

However, as he did, something tall and stringy that he'd assumed was merely more seaweed struck down at him. Hook barely managed to roll away before the stingers could paralyze him. Hook drew his sword as the sand around the chest shook itself off and a giant blue and yellow monstrous catfish emerged from it's hiding place. The "seaweed" that had lashed out was the creature's antennae, and the beautiful chest seemed to melt right into the beast's nose. The catfish roared and lunged at Hook, but before it could make a dinner of the captain, it was frozen in midair, encased in a block of solid ice.

"I warned you not to touch anything," Jafar hissed as he lowered his staff.

Hook sheathed his sword and let out a deep sigh. "My apologies, mate. Thank you for saving me... truly."

Jafar scoffed and proceeded onward. "See to it that it doesn't become a regular occurrence. I rather loathe allies who cannot fend for themselves."

The sorcerer and the pirate finally made their way to their destination: a large spiraling hermit crab shell that acted as the lair of the thief who stole the cache out from under them. The two Overtakers peered into the lair to see a giant mountain of treasure. Gold and jewels of every sort, presumably pilfered from the Treasure Sphere, were piled up in excess. Yet one treasure was not there: the fish hook that Jafar sought.

"Have we come all this way for nothing?" Jafar spat.

"I'd hardly call a king's ransom nothing," Hook said, practically drooling as he walked towards the mountain of gold. "How much do you think we could carry back to the ship?"

"Take whatever you want," Jafar said with a pout. "It's of no use to me."

Hook didn't need to be told twice. He immediately began to shovel as more gold as he could from the mountain into his satchel. However, as he began to do so, the entire mountain of treasure began to shake. Learning from his experience with the catfish, the second the shaking began, Hook ran away from the treasure mound and back to Jafar. The two watched as the treasure mound itself stood up, revealing an enormous purple and pink coconut crab missing one of his legs.
"Who dares steal from Tamatoa?" the crab bellowed. "I mean, really, it's so not polite. I only just got myself turned back upright, and now I've got to deal with more thieves. I really need better security."

Tamatoa's left eye spotted them before his right.

"Agh! Humans!" Tamatoa spat.

"You were the one who stole Maui's fish hook from the Treasure Sphere!" Jafar shouted accusingly.

"Of course I did," Tamatoa said. "No way I was passing up that treasure... well, okay, until Maui and his little girlfriend stole it back from me. So I'm not about to let you two steal any more of my treasure!"

"I think now would be an excellent time to open a Corridor of Darkness out of here," Hook said. "The hook obviously isn't here any more."

"Quite right," Jafar nodded. "I shall--"

But Jafar stopped short when he noticed something amongst Tamatoa's treasures: a golden oil lamp not unlike a certain lamp he'd held in his own two hands once.

"A lamp!" Jafar proclaimed. "GET ME THAT LAMP!"

"A lamp?" Hook asked. "I'll buy you one at the Radiant Garden marketplace with fringe along the shade. Let's go!"

"NO! I NEED THAT LAMP!" Jafar roared.

"Oh, so now you're sizing up more of my shiny treasure to steal?" Tamatoa said with outrage dripping from his words. "I will eat you both for such insolence!"

Tamatoa's giant claw descended upon the two Overtakers, but Jafar simply blasted it away with magic from his snake staff. Tamatoa recoiled and shook his claw in pain.

"Ooh, that really smarts, you know?" Tamatoa complained. "You dare to strike me with your... your... your very shiny staff. With so much power too. I must have it!"

"You'll not have my staff, you worthless crustacean," Jafar roared.

"Jafar, I don't think antagonizing him is the best idea right now," Hook urged.

"Question, what's better than a song?" Tamatoa posited before answering. "The REPRISE of a song!"

Music began to echo throughout the chamber as the exit sealed itself off. Tamatoa lunged towards the two Overtakers and swatted Hook out of the way, sending him tumbling clear across the cave.

"I'm gonna be SHINY!" Tamatoa began to sing. "I'm the sunrise on the surface of the sea!"

Jafar fired more blasts of energy from his staff at the approaching crab, but they barely seemed to phase the brute this time.

"Look at me, you see I'm so SHINY!" Tamatoa continued as he knocked Jafar over, sending the staff tumbling away from him. "Monsters'll see my weaponry and flee."

Tamatoa attempted to snatch up the staff, but Hook beat him to it. Hook rolled out of the way with
the staff and tossed it back to Jafar.

"C’est la vie," Tamatoa shrugged. "Don’t ya know?"

Jafar hoisted up his staff and summoned up a storm of poison rain over Tamatoa. The crab, however, simply shook his body happily as if he were enjoying a pleasant bath.

"I will shine, shine, shine like a rainbow after showers," Tamatoa boasted before lunging for the staff once more. "Your powers..."

Tamatoa snagged the staff, and though Jafar and Hook both attempted to pull it free of the crab's grip, his superior strength yanked it away.

"Will be mine, mine, mine!" Tamatoa boasted as he lifted up the staff and fired bolts of red lightning at his opponents from the scepter. "They'll be mourning you for hours! Bring flowers!"

Hook began attempting to climb up Tamatoa's back legs, a difficult feat with only one hand and a constantly dancing and moving crab. Jafar, however, was through playing games and transformed himself into the giant red genie. The genie attempted to physically tackle the powerful crab, almost knocking Hook off the creature's leg in the process.

"Call me selfish," Tamatoa shrugged as he pushed against Jafar. "Call me shellfish."

The crab hit a panel on the wall, and suddenly the entire cave went dark, with the only light coming from the bioluminescent algae. In this lighting, Tamatoa's golden treasure sparkled a bright cyan, and his face was lined with face paint markings.

"Far from the ones who looked down you," Tamatoa taunted as he knocked Jafar back, "chasing the power of magic to make yourself braver."

That seemed to strike a nerve with Jafar. The evil genie lashed out with a stream of fire that Tamatoa quickly doused by activating a water geyser between himself and the flames.

"It's never enough," Tamatoa taunted. "Love yourself, get your armor up."

Tamatoa then snagged Jafar's genie tail and began to spin him around the room, an act that made Hook, who had finally reached the treasure heap on Tamatoa's back, rather dizzy.

"We can see," Tamatoa said, "your heart is a vacancy!"

Tamatoa let go, causing Jafar to crash into the cave walls. Hook, meanwhile, finally steadied himself atop the treasure trove and stuffed the lamp that Jafar wanted into his satchel. While stuffing the lamp in the bag, he saw he also had a few crude gunpowder bombs that he'd crafted back on Neverland to keep the Lost Boys away from his supplies. If ever there was a time to use them, it was now.

"So why not be SHINNY?" Tamatoa asked as Jafar shrunk back to human size. "Watch me dazzle like a diamond in the rough. Strut my stuff."

Jafar gritted his teeth at Tamatoa's reference to a "diamond in the rough." Hook hopped down from the crab's back and ran over to his injured comrade.

"My stuff is so SHINNY!" Tamatoa sang.

Jafar, biting through the pain, summoned up four bandit Heartless to attack the crab on his behalf.

"Send your armies but they'll never be enough!" Tamatoa declared as he crushed the Heartless in a
single blow. "My shell's too tough, little men!"

"Bloody Hell, just let us go with our lives and you can keep the staff!" Hook cried out.

"NO!" Jafar protested.

Tamatoa threw his head back and laughed. "You could try, try, try, but I hate negotiations, prostrations."

Tamatoa's claws struck forward again, but Hook swiped them back with his sword and a few waves of dark energy that he hadn't tapped into since his battle with Luxord. They seemed to send Tamatoa scurrying back, but Hook knew he wouldn't be stopped for long.

"You will die, die, die!" Tamatoa threatened. "Never test a big crustacean's impatience!"

Hook ran back over to Jafar and hoisted Jafar's arm over his shoulders.

"Unless you have something SHINY!" Tamatoa added. "Unless you have something SHIIINYYYY!!!"

And just as Tamatoa held out his last note, Hook's crude bobs that he wedged under Tamatoa's shell went off. The giant crab cried out in agony and stumbled about trying to free himself of the source of the terrible pain. Tamatoa flailed about so much, that he dropped Jafar's staff. Hook quickly darted over to it and shoved the staff back into Jafar's hands.

"Now open a bloody Corridor of Darkness!" Hook ordered.

"Not without my lamp!" Jafar hissed.

"DO IT NOW!" Hook shouted, taking Jafar off guard.

The sorcerer, however, obeyed and swept himself and his lover away into the darkness as Tamatoa continued to flail about in pain.

It had taken some convincing, but eventually Steve and Daken had managed to win Kingpin over to their side. Smythe remained skeptical, but even he started to seem open to their proposition, which Daken figured was about as good as anyone was going to get with him. They'd even managed to talk Kingpin into getting Steve a change of clothes so that he wouldn't just be sitting around in ripped jeans with his privates hanging out.

"Here they come," Smythe announced when he saw the goblins flying in from the horizon. "Are you certain this will work?"

"No, but you don't have a better alternative to get rid of them," Daken pointed out.

"This will work!" Kingpin declared. "There is no reason to doubt the brilliance of the Kingpin!"

Smythe shot Steve and Daken a look that conveyed the message that there were a plethora of reasons to doubt his associate's "brilliance." Daken and Steve moved into position, crouching in the rafters. Kingpin and Smythe, meanwhile, tried to act natural, though their jittery anticipation was obvious to Daken looking down.

"We're baaaaaaack!" the Green Goblin announced with a laugh as he and the Hobgoblin flew into the room, still riding their gliders.
"Ah, yes, welcome back, gentlemen," Kingpin said. "I'm afraid there are matters we must discuss. It is high time we face the simple fact: Spider-Carnage isn't coming back."

"Oh ye of the little faith!" Hobgoblin scolded. "Our prisoners are going to lead us right to him!"

"I'm afraid not," Kingpin said. "I am have conducted an open and honest interrogation of Daken Akihiro and Steve Newlin, and I can assure you, they are a dead end lead. We must now focus on the future rather than the past."

"We don't work for you, Kingpin," the Green Goblin reminded him. "If what you say is true, then you've just given up your one chance to survive this. You've been left alive because Spider-Carnage needed you. If that's no longer true? Well then, it's time for you to pay for your sins against Norman Osborn!"

"I think not," Kingpin said. "NOW!"

On Kingpin's signal, Daken and Steve dropped from the rafters and knocked the goblins off their gliders. The two goblins tumbled to the floor as their gliders spiraled off in different directions. Daken extended his claws and ran towards the Green Goblin, but the goblin was swift and threw a pumpkin bomb directly at his opponent that exploded less than a foot away from Daken's face. The blast seared Daken's skin and knocked him backwards. Though the burns began to heal immediately, the pain certainly wasn't any less.

The Green Goblin scrambled to his feet and hopped back onto the glider, eagerly trying to regain altitude. Smythe, meanwhile, had taken to his cybernetic hover chair and flown into the fray. Smythe targeted the goblin with his chair's weapons system and launched a small compact missile at the glider. The Green Goblin barely managed to roll in midair out of the way, allowing the missile to collide with the wall and blow a hole in it.

The Green Goblin fired another pumpkin bomb from his glider, this time aiming directly for Smythe. Smythe's chair was clunkier and harder to maneuver than the Green Goblin's glider, and so Smythe did the only thing he could do and jumped free of the exploding chair. The goblin laughed as Smythe tumbled back down to Daken's side.

"I warned you he was practically invincible on that flying wing of his," Smythe said.

"Even gods bleed," Daken said with determination. "I'll keep him busy. You ground him!"

The Green Goblin swooped down upon Daken and Smythe. Smythe dashed off to the side while Daken continued to run directly in front of the glider's path, practically daring the goblin to pursue him. The Green Goblin dropped countless bombs as he cackled maniacally, with Daken barely able to stay ahead of the blast radius. With his focus so locked onto Daken, the Green Goblin had left Smythe unattended.

Smythe knew that he had one shot, and it had to be perfect. He charged the fins protruding from his shoulders with energy and unleashed them both, aiming for the steering mechanism on the underside of the glider. The laser blasts connected, and immediately the goblin seemed to wobble about aimlessly. It wasn't long before the Green Goblin crashed directly into the wall, causing the bombs in his glider to all detonate at once. Despite the heavy blast, the Green Goblin tumbled down to the ground, still alive and in one piece.

As the goblin struggled to get to his feet and reoriented himself, Daken ran up behind him and stabbed his claws through his opponent's back. The goblin cried out in pain and tried to squirm free, but Daken had made sure that his claws would pierce directly through the Green Goblin's heart... or
whatever there was that was left of it. Finally, the goblin went limp, and Daken threw the supervillain's corpse down onto the floor, exposing his bloodied claws.

Smythe knelt down to the Green Goblin's corpse and pulled off the madman's mask, exposing Norman Osborn's face.

"I knew it," Smythe said.

"I've always wanted to do that to Osborn," Daken declared.

"As have I," Smythe agreed with a nod. "I suppose my father has now truly been avenged."

"And how does it feel?" Daken asked.

Smythe smiled. "Quite pleasant."

Whilst Daken and Smythe dispatched the Green Goblin, Kingpin and Steve Newlin had taken to battling the Hobgoblin. The Hobgoblin caused his two opponents to scatter with a well aimed pumpkin bomb in their direction. Just like the Green Goblin, the Hobgoblin knew he was infinitely more powerful atop his glider, and he scrambled towards it. Steve Newlin, with a burst of vampiric speed, dashed over to tackle the Hobgoblin before he could re-mount the glider.

It was only after Steve was rolling on the ground with the Hobgoblin that the young vampire realized that his vampiric strength had waned yet again. Though the Hobgoblin had no superhuman strength aside from armor that strengthened his muscles, he was easily able to get the upper hand over Steve who, prior to becoming a vampire, had barely been able to bench press the bar when working out. The Hobgoblin cackled as he pinned Steve down and pulled out a razor bat to slice the vampire's throat. With his powers waning, Steve doubted that he'd be able to heal from this.

Hobgoblin, however, found himself blasted off from on top of Steve. Kingpin held his diamond tipped cane threateningly as it smoked from the laser blast that he'd fired from it. Kingpin ran over to Steve and helped his comrade to his feet.

"Thanks for that," Steve said.

"This blasted pest has been a thorn in my side for some time!" Kingpin declared. "I was more than happy to do so!"

"Oh Kingpin, I'm hurt by your words," Hobgoblin said with a mocking sense of betrayal. "We've had some good times, haven't we? Remember that time I took over your empire? I'll have to do that again once I destroy you once and for all!"

"That will NOT happen!" Kingpin said with an angry roar as he hurled a nearby coffee table at the Hobgoblin.

The Hobgoblin rolled out of the way of the crashing table and tried to get to his feet. However, Kingpin was coming for him now, cane in hand. With strength unmatched by ordinary men, Kingpin brought down his cane on the Hobgoblin's shoulder. The goblin yelled out in pain and anger as he could feel the shoulder dislocating. Hobgoblin's only option was to keep Kingpin off of him by delivering the crime boss a well place kick to the knees.

Kingpin stumbled at the kick, and with his balance upset by the kick, he tumbled to the floor just long enough for Hobgoblin to get back up. The Hobgoblin drew a laser pistol from his holster and began to fire upon Kingpin. Kingpin scrambled to dodge the blasts and run for cover behind the desk. Steve saw his chance. While the Hobgoblin's attention was focused on Kingpin, he could
wrestle the gun away.

Steve dashed up and grabbed onto the gun, forcing Hobgoblin to cease firing on the Kingpin. The Hobgoblin, however, did not relent the weapon. The two men tugged on the gun and struggled to wrest it free of the other man's grasp. Steve, however, became so focused on getting the pistol out of the Hobgoblin's hands that he did not notice where the barrel of the gun was pointing. The Hobgoblin pulled the trigger, and Steve screamed as the laser beam shot right through his side.

Steve doubled down in pain, and, just as he'd suspected, he wasn't healing. Steve looked up to see what the Hobgoblin was doing now, only to find the barrel of the gun in his face.

"Wasn't really a challenge," Hobgoblin said. "You're off your game, kid. Spider-Man is a bigger challenge than you, and you can die knowing just how pathetic your attempt at a fight was."

Steve closed his eyes and prepared for the worst. He heard a squishing and snapping noise that didn't sound like any gunfire that Steve had ever heard. He opened his eyes to see the Hobgoblin's headless corpse laying in front of him. The location of the Hobgoblin's head, however, was of far greater interest to Steve.

"Did you miss me?" Russell asked with a grin as he used the supervillain's severed head as a hand puppet to mouth the question.

Steve jumped into Russell's arms at what had to be vampiric speeds, causing his boyfriend to drop the severed head onto the ground.

"FUCK YES!" Steve said, practically crying as he pressed his mouth against Russell's.

And for that moment, nothing else mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Madame Frou Frou is the drag queen alter ego of Archibald Snatcher from The Boxtrolls.

Tamatoa is from Moana.
Hook was sprawled out, only half-dressed, on Jafar's bed. Jafar didn't mind. Without a shirt or vest, Hook was exposing his hairy chest and the full extent of the harness that held his hook in place, a sight that was most pleasant for the sorcerer. Rarely ever did Jafar relinquish power or dominance, yet Hook's forcefulness back in Lalotai had prompted a need in both men for something a bit different when they returned to the bedroom. With the moment now past, however, Jafar had dressed and resumed being furious over the Tamatoa debacle.

"Not only was I denied my revenge," Jafar ranted, "but I was dealt a humiliating defeat!"

"A travesty indeed," Hook agreed half-heartedly whilst absent-mindedly picking dirt out from under his fingernails with the tip of his hook.

"And what's worse?" Jafar continued. "You forced me to retreat before I could get the LAMP!"

"I saved both of our lives!" Hook argued as he pulled his attention away from his nails.

"Bah! A simple-minded reaction," Jafar objected. "You claim that your encounter with the Beast strengthened your resolved, but I see now that it has made you cowardly and quick to surrender."

"No, I've simply been reminded in the worst possible way that I value my life above my desires," Hook said as hopped off the bed and glowered at Jafar. "You should learn the same lesson, mate."

"A fool's lesson," Jafar remarked.

Hook saw that this conversation was going nowhere fast. He reached for his satchel and peaked inside to make sure that the lamp was still there. Hook knew Jafar's mood would improve dramatically once he saw that Hook had managed to get away Scott-free with the lamp.

"Well perhaps I may know... something that'll improve your mood," Hook said.

"I have little interest in you peddling your flesh a second time," Jafar said with a sneer. "I need to devote my time to divining a way to get that lamp away from the infernal crustacean since you had to retreat to save your own worthless life."

Hook felt the stinging bite of Jafar's words and closed the latch on the satchel. "On second thought, there's nothing I can offer you that'll make you in any way happy, I see."

Hook got up and began to put his shirt and vest back on when the sound of Maleficent's summons echoed throughout their chamber. Hook and Jafar walked in silence to the room that had once been Where Nothing Gathers. Currently, the room had been repainted a deep purple to match the rest of the Eminence Palace with thirteen thrones of a reasonable height circled around a tiled mosaic of a dragon. Maleficent had taken to renaming this room "Where Villains Gather." When Hook and Jafar arrived, they saw that Maleficent, Grimhilde, Pete, Ursula, Fish Mooney, Imperious, Loki, Cruella De Vil, and Winifred Sanderson were already in attendance. Hook and Jafar grabbed vacant seats on opposite sides of the room.

"All who I have invited to this meeting are now present," Maleficent said.
"And why only us, hmm?" Imperious asked. "What secrets is the Mistress of All Evil keeping from the others."

"Be silent and listen," Maleficent warned. "My plan will be revealed all in due time, but you must be patient. For now, we must set the stage for our glorious return to power. There are three critical tasks before us, and those of us present will be attending to them. Winifred, the first task lies with you."

"What dost thou ask of me, o' great one?" Winnie asked, eager to please.

"Ursula and Fish Mooney have brought back troubling news," Maleficent explained. "That fool Mozenrath has gathered allies and seized control of Twilight Town. I care little for whatever petty conquests he has made, but I underestimated him once before." Maleficent shot a glare at Jafar, who merely rolled his eyes in response. "That will not happen again. Therefore, Winifred, I am tasking you and your sisters to establish an outpost within his kingdom and monitor his movements. Should he become a threat, we will destroy him."

Winnie rose from her throne and gave a bow. "Thy will shall be done! We will depart immediately!"

Maleficent nodded in satisfaction, and Winnie vanished into a Corridor of Darkness.

"The second order of business," Maleficent continued. "The meddlesome heroes who thwarted our plans to rewrite reality. They must be punished for their transgressions. Grimhilde has a plan to get revenge on Sora and his lackeys, and she shall lead this undertaking."

Grimhilde cackled wickedly at that. "Yes indeed. And I have chosen Cruella, Ursula, Jafar, and Pete to join me in this little scheme."

"I look forward to givin' that pipsqueak a taste o' his own medicine!" Pete said with a chuckle.

"I had hoped to pursue other endeavors," Jafar admitted, earning a scoff from Hook, "but my revenge against that boy has been delayed for far too long!"

"It's so exciting!" Ursula said, rubbing her tentacles together eagerly. "I'm very happy to be a part of this one!"

"Tonight!" Cruella declared. "Let's do the job and take his spirit tonight!"

"We shall discuss the specifics of the plan in my chambers," Grimhilde added.

Maleficent smirked with evil glee at her allies' enthusiasm. "Off with you, then."

Five Corridors of Darkness flashed across the room, leaving only Hook, Loki, Fish, Imperious, and Maleficent herself in Where Villains Gather.

"So I assume the five of us will be the team for the third undertaking," Loki remarked.

"Indeed," Maleficent nodded.

"I am quite surprised you would chose me to join you," Imperious commented. "After all, you haven't exactly been the most welcoming ally thus far."

"Better to have you close where I can keep an eye on you," Maleficent said. "If I left you behind with the others, who knows what mischief you'd find for yourself."

"A wise choice," Imperious said with a laugh.
"So what world exactly do the five of us have the pleasure of visiting?" Hook asked.

"We are returning to your former home," Maleficent answered. "Storybrooke."

Excitement swelled onto Hook's face. "I don't suppose there'll be ample time to allow me to slay a crocodile while we're there."

"I would hardly dream of denying you your vengeance," Maleficent said. "However, I will need you in particular to act as my guide for my purposes in that town. However, once that is completed, you may seek vengeance to your heart's content."

"I knew I loved you for good reason," Hook said, unable to wipe the smile from his face.

"But what exactly are we going back to Storybrooke for?" Fish asked. "If I recall, you burned it to the ground during your last visit."

"Indeed I did," Maleficent replied. "However, I seek to expand my powers, and to do that, I require something... special that can only be found there."

"And that would be?" Loki asked.

Maleficent opened a Corridor of Darkness in the center of the room and proceeded towards it.

"A pile of ash," she answered as she stepped through.

Demyx was minding his own business, plucking away at his sitar and avoiding any and all work as usual, when a plume of smoke swelled around him. He coughed and sputtered and tried to fan the smoke away. Once it cleared, he found that he was far from the comfortable couch that had taken on a permanent imprint of his posterior. He was in the Villain's Vale dungeons, thankfully still on the right side of the iron bars, staring directly at a very frustrated looking Hades.

"Uhhh, hi," Demyx said with a wave.

"Let's play a fun game of I-Spy," Hades said. "I'll go first. I spy with my little eye... no, wait, I don't spy with my little eye ANY OF OUR NON-COMATOSE PRISONERS."

Hades gestured angrily to the cells that had once contained the captured Norts. Sure enough, Luxord, Marluxia, Larxene, and Young Xehanort were all missing. Only the comatose Terra and Aqua remained. Xemnas was gone too, but Demyx knew that Maleficent had moved him to a special cell in the Eminence Palace following the brutal eternal torment inflicted upon him. The other four missing Norts did not bode well at all.

"Oh," Demyx said.

"And, correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't YOU left behind to WATCH them while Daken and Steve were stuck on that alternate universe Hell world?" Hades asked.

"Technically nobody asked me to do that job," Demyx said. "So, really, it's all Steve's fault for getting turned into a bat demon in the first place."

"WRONG. ANSWER!" Hades said, flaring up orange and getting up in Demyx's face. "DO YOU TAKE YOUR INTERNAL ORGANS FRIED OR OVER EASY?"

"Wait, wait!" a third voice beckoned from one of the cells.
Hades cooled down to blue slightly to see Sarah Newlin waving at him from her solitary confinement.

"I saw the whole thing," Sarah said. "Don't hurt that poor boy, Satan!"

"Okay, number one, I'm Hades, not the devil," Hades clarified. "I know the devil. His son's a buddy of mine. And believe me, I am MUCH more agreeable than the devil. And number two, you better tell me EXACTLY what happened or I just might just ignore your ex-husband's request to keep you alive and THROW YOU INTO TARTARUS MYSELF."

"There's no need to be rude," Sarah said. "I'm gonna tell you. Some guy in black with a giant key for a sword showed up here, and he sent the gay Mexican with silver hair back in time."

"The racism is strong in this one," Demyx said.

"Then, oh Jesus it was so horrible," Sarah said. "He killed the three others who are missing, and then he stabbed that key into the two sleeping kids which changed their hair color and made them both white for some reason."

"Sounds like he wanted to get rid of Xehanort's heart," Demyx said. "But if he killed Marluxia, Larxene, and Luxord, that means they got recompleted as real people again."

"Uh, 'scuse me, but dead is dead, Dem-Dem," Hades said. "Dead souls don't just get 'recompleted' or any of that booga booga."

"Yeah but they were Nobodies," Demyx said. "And if a Nobody and its corresponding Heartless both get destroyed, then the original person comes back together again."

"Oy, another reason to hate Nobodies," Hades growled. "And where are our 'recompleted' prisoners now?"

"How should I know?" Demyx asked. "I'm not an expert on all this junk!"

"Well that's just great," Hades grumbled. "And now guess who has to go FIND them."

"You do?" Demyx asked.

"Guess again," Hades said through gritted teeth.

Demyx paused for a moment to think before the realization hit him. "Huh? What? ME? No, you're sending the wrong guy!"

Hades snapped his fingers and a Corridor of Darkness opened. Hades then lifted Demyx up by his jacket collar.

"Find them or YOU'LL EARN YOURSELF A ONE WAY TICKET TO TARTARUS!" Hades shouted as he hurled Demyx through the dark corridor.

A Corridor of Darkness opened in the conference chamber of Villain's Vale and from it emerged Russell Edgington, Steve Newlin, Kingpin, Smythe, and Daken.

"Voila!" Steve announced. "Welcome to Villain's Vale."

"Incredible," Smythe remarked. "It was as if you opened a time dilation portal through your own mind, Mr. Edgington."
"It's a perk that comes as a signin' bonus for the Overtakers," Russell said. "We'll teach y'all how to do it too."

"Sounds good," Daken said. "I look forward to learning."

"You are an uppity Undertaker," Russell said. "And the only reason I haven't torn your head off your shoulders for not tellin' me about Steve on the phone is because that's a bad first impression for our newest recruits."

Daken scowled and looked away.

"Russell, wait," Steve said. "Daken saved my life back there. He and I got through that Hell together. If it weren't for him, none of us would be standing here today. And he was a big help runnin' the Overtakers while y'all were away. If anyone deserves the honor of bein' an official Overtaker, it's him."

Daken looked at Steve in surprise, unsure what to think about his comrade's act of kindness. Daken wasn't used to anybody sharing power with him. Usually he had to carve out any power he got for himself by way of bloodshed. This way was... strange to Daken, but in a good way.

"My apologies then, Mr. Akihiro," Russell said. "Any friend of Steve's is a friend of mine. I'll see to it personally that Maleficent and Hades are persuaded to promote all of y'all into our ranks."

"First things first," Kingpin said. "Mr. Newlin, you promised me a city that needed a powerful hand to guide it."

Steve escorted Kingpin and Smythe out to the balcony. The blue and purple stone hills took the two newcomers' breath away. The Hollow Bastion castle peaked out over the horizon.

"Just beyond that ridge is a city called Radiant Garden," Steve explained. "I'm a pretty prominent public figure there: a preacher and well respected journalist. Now I've been pushing for a democratic prime minister election, and I'm gettin' close to forcing our enemy's hand on that matter. But if I run for the position or any of the known Overtakers do, it'll just look like a power grab and we'll lose. That's where you come in."

"A powerful stranger with no skeletons in his closet," Kingpin said.

"Exactly," Steve said. "We're gonna get you established as a wealthy public face in the city who everyone will trust. Then, when the time comes for the forced election, you'll win and seize control of the office for the Overtakers without the public knowing."

"I assume a substantial portion of the rewards of this scheme will belong to me," Kingpin said. "The Kingpin is no one's puppet ruler."

"If I wanted a puppet, I'd have put some Joe Blow off the street in a three piece suit," Steve said. "I want the Kingpin sittin' in Ansem's old office, and that means I want everything that the Kingpin entails."

"Excellent," Kingpin said, rubbing his hands together greedily.

"I, on the other hand, am considerably less enamored by this proposition," Smythe said. "If Kingpin is to be permitted to enjoy all the power of controlling this city, what does your head Overtaker, Maleficent, get out of it."

"One day Maleficent is gonna take back that castle and rule Radiant Garden openly," Steve said.
"When that day comes, you'll be asked to hand over all power to her, but if you've done a good job, she'll give you a slice of the power to keep. And in the mean time, the city will be yours to amass riches and whatever else you could want as long as it doesn't jeopardize Maleficent's goals. You won't get a better offer than that."

Kingpin scratched his chin, considering this new information. The thought of abdicating power to Maleficent one day did not please him. However, the rewards dangled in front of him were too tempting a treat to pass up. And besides, who knew, maybe one day Kingpin himself could ascend the ranks of the Overtakers as he did the New York mob.

"Very well, Mr. Newlin," Kingpin said. "I accept your terms. Let us begin."

Doctor Doom stepped out of the Corridor of Darkness into the ruins of Castle Doom. Once, Latveria was feared around the globe, and Doom's iron fist made all the world tremble. But now, his great empire was nothing more than a crumbling pile of rocks that stood as a monument to his defeat. He'd lost his mighty kingdom because of those meddlesome heroes and Loki's infuriating father Odin.

"A fortress does not a ruler make," Doom said, echoing what he told Loki when they visited this site long ago.

Doom knew what he had to do: it was time for Latveria to rise again. There would no more waiting around for the Book of Prophecies to do the job for him. He built this kingdom through sweat and toil, and that was how it would rise again. With his great powers, the infrastructure wouldn't even take more than a day to fix. His global standing would only take slightly longer to rebuild.

Amidst the ruins of Castle Doom, Doom saw the silhouette of a woman standing several yards away. He barely had time to ponder who this woman might be when the familiar change in barometric pressure put Doom on his toes. He barely managed to put up a deflection shield in time to protect himself from an onslaught of hot pink energy blasted towards him. Violet lightning crackled through the sky as Doom dispersed the energy and faced the sorceress who'd attacked him.

"Morgan le Fay," Doom spat furiously as his former teacher strolled towards him, demons flanking her on all sides.

"You've stolen from me, Victor von Doom," Morgan hissed angrily. "You came to me and offered yourself to me in exchange for my dark secrets. And yet, you betrayed my trust, and tonight you will die for it!"

"Morgan, look around you!" Doom shouted.

"And all the worlds will be spared any more of your selfish villainy!" Morgan continued, paying no heed to Doom's words.

"Look around you, dammit!" Doom yelled. "Can you not see that I have lost my kingdom?"

"You haven't lost nearly enough!" Morgan shrieked as she unleashed another bolt of pink energy onto Doom.

Doom once again blocked her spell, shielding himself from the blast. The various plant life and mosses around Doom were not so fortunate and disintegrated immediately upon contact with the mystical energy.

"Morgan, I will not tolerate this!" Doom roared in fury as he broke her spell a second time.
"Even your groveling is arrogant," Morgan scoffed. "Go, my pets! Bring him here! Blood and bones!"

At her command, Morgan's demonic legions charged after Doom like a pack of starving dogs, chomping at the bits for a taste of him. And in his heart, for a moment, Doctor Doom felt fear unlike any he had ever allowed himself to experience before....

Chapter End Notes

Heavy inspiration from the last scene in this chapter came from Dark Avengers vol.1 #2
King's Gambit

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay on this chapter. My muse has been a bit fickle, and I've had other concerns on my mind.

This chapter features half of a chess match detailed between two characters. If you'd like a visual demonstration of the game, look up "The Immortal Game" and you'll find it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A Corridor of Darkness opened in the foyer of a luxurious estate. Pete exited the Corridor first, followed by Grimhilde, Cruella, Jafar, and Ursula. Cruella glanced around at the décor of this room, judging the taste of the interior decorator. When Cruella noticed that Grimhilde was doing to same, she smiled. The two of them, despite being from radically different worlds, had a sameness that was rare to find, even amongst the other Overtakers.

"Welp, this is it," Pete said, gesturing dramatically around him. "This is the house of an old friend of mine I made when I was out collectin' Heartless for Maleficent. She's gonna let us stay here for our big scheme since her house is in prox-symmetry to-


"Yeah, that," Pete said. "Anyway, it's close to the big ol' castle we're headin' to!

"Is your friend expecting us?" Grimhilde asked.

"I sent a letter ahead with one of my Heartless," Pete said. "I'll check an' see if she's home." Pete turned and yelled up the stairs. "HELLOOOOO! IT'S YOUR OLD PAL, PETE!"

A woman with gray hair emerged from the parlor with the sound of clacking heels against the tiled floor. She wore a burgundy dress and a haughty expression that never left her face. Following closely to his mistress, a plump tuxedo cat also made his entrance.

"I see that a day's notice was too far in advance for you," the woman replied. "Please excuse the mess. I've yet to find a replacement for my... maid."

She spoke the word "maid" with a venom that conveyed the message that there was more to this story. Grimhilde's lips curled into a smirk, recognizing a similar venom to her own. Something told her that this woman was destined to become a fast friend.

"Folks, this here's Lady Tremaine," Pete proclaimed. "She's ol' Cinderelly's wicked stepmother."

Tremaine seemed to bristle both at the mention of "Cinderelly" and being referred to by her relationship her step-daughter, but she kept silent.

"M'lady, these folks here are the Overtakers," Pete said. "They're my pals from across a bunch o' worlds I told ya 'bout. That there's Jafar, then Ursula's the octopus, Cruella De Vil's the one in the fur coat, and the lovely lady in purple is Queen Grimhilde, the Evil Queen runnin' this lil' get together."
"Charmed, I'm sure," Lady Tremaine replied. "Now then, it is my understanding that you five intend to infiltrate Cinderella's royal ball?"

"That's right!" Ursula said. "She's got a few people on her guest book that have really earned some trouble."

"The warriors of the Keyblade," Grimhilde specified. "Perhaps you've encountered them?"

Tremaine's expression darkened. "Oh yes. I have indeed. One of them, a girl with sapphire hair, broke into my home and aided Cinderella in defying my wishes. Then that so called hero left my daughters and I to be attacked by a demonic carriage that left us all with terrible burn scars after we escaped."

"That sounds to me like Master Aqua," Grimhilde replied. "She will not be attending this evening. We have her under an eternal sleep in our dungeon."

"The specifics don't matter to me," Tremaine replied. "All those who wield one of the Keyblades hold my contempt. Any friend of Cinderella is an enemy of mine."

"Then we have an understanding," Grimhilde said. "We attack at the ball tonight at my direction. Lady Tremaine, if you wish, you may- ... Cruella, what are you doing?"

Cruella glanced up in confusion. Tremaine's cat was in one hand, a roll of tape measure in the other.

"I was simply taking measurements for a new hat," Cruella explained. "He has such beautiful fur."

The cat hissed and ran to hide under Tremaine's skirt.

"Lucifer will become no hat of yours," Tremaine warned.

"Perhaps a scarf then?" Cruella asked with a shrug.

Grimhilde sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Whilst she was putting on the appearance of annoyance, in reality she was holding back laughter. Cruella's vicious shenanigans tickled her more than anything else.

Following Yen Sid's death, his tower had practically been left abandoned. With Sora and his friends helping refugees in Traverse Town, no one was guarding the mysterious tower or its chamber of doors to the various outposts that Yen Sid established across the worlds. Because of that, Maleficent her team of associates were able to proceed through to Storybrooke with ease. Maleficent, Loki, Fish, Imperious, and Hook emerged in the ballroom of the Sorcerer's Mansion in Storybrooke.

"Home, sweet home," Hook said, everything inside of him itching to go after Rumplestiltskin again.

"A reminder for all of you," Maleficent said. "While you can open a Corridor of Darkness here in Storybrooke, because of the town's protection spell, you cannot return to this world through one. Do not open one unless you are truly ready to depart this world. In addition, do not cross the town line under any circumstances. Beyond that line is a land without magic. Retrieving you from it would be an arduous task."

"We'll be careful," Fish said.

"Right, well, to get the ashes you seek, well need to make our way to the library first," Hook explained, taking the lead.
"We're walking there?" Imperious groaned. "Some of us do have magical powers, you know."

"Stop your whining," Maleficent ordered. "We will draw less attention if we avoid dark magic as much as possible. We have the cover of nightfall to cloak us in darkness. Let us use it."

With no one objecting further, the procession followed the pirate out the mansion and down the road leading towards town. Loki made an effort to walk alongside Maleficent and match her pace, an action that was unusual given Loki's long, quick strides and Maleficent's slow and steady walking pace that was practically demanded by her long gown and insistence on wearing high heels.

"Maleficent, my dear, might I interest you in a game?" Loki asked.

"I am not one for games, Loki," Maleficent replied.

"Allow me to be more candid," Loki said, "I would test the mettle of your mental prowess against my own."

Maleficent raised an eyebrow and glared at Loki. She had no idea what sort of foolishness her unpredictable ally could be planning, but she had to admit she was intrigued.

"Speak," Maleficent commanded.

"A game of chess while we walk," Loki suggested.

"We've no board to play on," Maleficent pointed out, "and to conjure one would require stopping to play, something I am not willing to do."

Loki laughed at that. "Is the Mistress of All Evil so reliant on the physical that she cannot play Loki on a mental battle field?"

Maleficent sneered at Loki's crude attempt to bait her, yet she was intrigued to see how the two would fare in a match against one another. "Very well, you may play white. The Mistress of Darkness only plays black."

"King's pawn to E4," Loki began.

"Pawn to E5," Maleficent countered.

"Pawn to F4," Loki said. "King's gambit."

"Accepted," Maleficent replied. "Pawn takes pawn."

"Are they really going to do this the whole time we're walking?" Fish whispered to Hook.

"I fear so," Hook answered. "Loki clearly has some mischief up his sleeve. Were I Maleficent, I'd never have engaged in such an ill fated match."

"Don't count her out just yet," Fish said. "If there's one thing I know my girl Maleficent can do, it's persevere."

"A hundred munny on Loki," Hook said with a mischievous smirk. "Care to take the bet?"

"Sure, why not?" Fish answered. "Now what am I going to buy with a hundred munny?"

"Bishop to C4," Loki continued.
"A bit aggressive already, aren't we?" Maleficent asked. "Queen to H4. Check."

"And you call me aggressive," Loki laughed.

"Never underestimate the dangers of a queen," Maleficent warned.

"King to F1 to move out of check," Loki said.

"Pawn to B5," Maleficent continued.

"You're baiting me into something," Loki said, "but I admit my curiosity is piqued. "Bishop takes pawn."

"Knight to F6," Maleficent said, making her next move.

"Never much understood why the mortals call that piece a knight," Loki said. "All the knights I've known have been bull headed oafs, more inclined to barrel forward than to make such a sneaky move as an 'L' shape."

"Are you critiquing the game or are you playing it?" Maleficent asked.

"Very well," Loki said. "Knight to F3."

"Queen to H6," Maleficent said, saving her queen from the wrath of Loki's knight.

"Pawn to D3," Loki said.

"Knight to H5," Maleficent said with a confident grin. "Do take some time to think about your choices, dear. I'd hardly like this to end quickly."

"Oh, don't worry, you won't," Loki said with a smirk. "Knight to H4."

"Queen to G5," Maleficent said smugly. "So will you be sacrificing your knight at H4 or your bishop at B5?"

"Neither," Loki said with a shrug. "Knight to F5."

"Pawn to C6," Maleficent said. "You've left bishop vulnerable."

"And you your knight," Loki countered. "Pawn to G4."

"Knight to F6," Maleficent said, relenting her position to save her knight.

"Hmm, rook to G1," Loki said.

"HA! The first blood of the game is mine," Maleficent said. "Pawn takes bishop at B5. Did you foolishly believe I'd go easy on you?"

"Premature gloating is unbecoming," Loki sneered.

"You would know," Maleficent said with a chuckle.

"We're almost to town," Hook said. "Some of us should take a less conspicuous appearance before we arrive."

Hook's glance was aimed directly at Imperious.
"I suppose I am far too beautiful for your simple town," Imperious said with a laugh.

"I too shall slip into something more subtle," Maleficent agreed.

With a shimmer of green fire, Maleficent donned her casual clothes that she wore on her last trip to Storybrooke. Imperious used his magic to change his appearance as well, but his transformation was far more dramatic. His mummy-like appearance melted into a normal human face with long blonde hair and a goatee. Loki sneered at how much it reminded him of Thor.

"I trust this will suffice," Imperious said, his voice having changed along with his appearance.

"Aye, that'll do," Hook said. "Now then, it'll be wise to stagger ourselves and proceed along different routes so as to not draw the attention of the residents. Maleficent is familiar with the lay of lands, so she and Loki may proceed down main street. Fish, Imperious, and I shall take the round-about way through the side streets. My devilishly handsome features are well known in this town. It'll work to our advantage for me to avoid populated areas. We'll rendezvous outside the library."

Maleficent nodded in satisfaction. "Very well. If anything goes awry, stay in contact through the use of the communication devices."

Hook nodded and led Fish and Imperious down a path that snaked behind a shopping center at the edge of town.

"Now then, where were we?" Loki asked as he and Maleficent proceeded down main street. "Ah yes, pawn to H4."

Riku snapped his last silver cufflinks into place and admired his outfit in the mirror. Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather had really gone all out in tailoring his outfit for the ball. It was simple but elegant, based on the aesthetic of princes in Cinderella's world but with a sleeker cut that fell more in line with Riku's style. The entire outfit was black with silver decorative effects and a silver heart shaped pendant hanging from the collar. Riku mused that this was the first time he'd worn long sleeves in a long time, but it felt right. He felt very handsome today.

"You're lookin' great, Riku!" King Mickey said as he and Queen Minnie walked into the room.

"Oh yes! Very dashing," Minnie agreed.

Mickey and Mickey were also dressed up for the ball in their royal attire. While Minnie wore a variation on the dress that Riku was used to seeing her wear, Mickey was dressed in an outfit that Riku had never seen before. It was frilly and puffy and seemed a bit ill fitting, and the crown that Mickey wore atop his head seemed much too big for the tiny king. Riku had only ever seen Mickey in travelling clothes, and Riku figured that that was exactly the way Mickey preferred it. He didn't have the innate poise or regality of his wife. Mickey was an everyday normal guy who just so happened to be royalty.

"Thank you," Riku said with a smile. "Are Donald and Goofy ready?"

"Yup! Already on the Gummi ship," Mickey said. "What about Sora and Kairi?"

"We're ready!" Kairi said as she came twirling out in a frilly pink and white gown.

Riku's jaws dropped, however, when he saw Sora. Sora was wearing a palette swapped version of Riku's outfit, colored gold and white to contrast to Riku's black and silver. Sora's pedant was in the shape of a crown, just like his necklace. Riku had never seen Sora dressed up so nicely. Sora rarely
ever wore anything but shorts. Riku found his boyfriend to be even more handsome than he thought possible.

"You... look amazing!" Riku said as he walked over to Sora.

"Thanks Riku!" Sora said as he flexed his muscles (or lack thereof) to show off. "You do too!"

Riku leaned in and gave Sora a quick peck on the lips.

"You guys have fun," Lea said as he and Bobby Drake walked over to see them off.

"You sure you guys are fine with watching Traverse Town?" Kairi asked.

"Yeah, you can still come along if you want," Sora said. "The Fairy Godmother has some extra suits you can borrow."

"Fancy balls aren't really my thing," Lea said.

"Besides, with Taran and his friends back in Prydain, you'd have to trust Thor and Ghost Rider with watching the town," Bobby said. "Pretty sure you'd come home to motorcycle jousting if you did."

"That actually kinda sounds like fun," Lea mused, earning an elbow in the side from Bobby.

"Well, we better get goin!'" Mickey said when he glanced down at his watch. "The ball starts in an hour!"

With Grimhilde, Pete, and Cruella putting the finishing touches on the plan to infiltrate the ball, Jafar was left free to focus his energies on other outlets. Jafar spread his map of Lalotai out over Tremaine's dining room table. With a macaw feather pen in hand, Jafar marked areas of interests that could be of use for trapping Tamatoa and claiming the lamp that rightfully should have been his.

"Somebody's a distracted genie," Ursula teased as she slithered over to the table. "Lalotai, hmm? Haven't been in ages! I'm due for a return trip!"

"Perhaps you will make better company than that fool, Hook," Jafar said. "I doubt you'd be so inclined to retreat amidst a battle with such power at stake."

"Boyfriend troubles?" Ursula asked as she bumped Jafar with her hip, causing the sorcerer to stumble slightly.

"Boyfriend is too strong of a word," Jafar clarified. "Bed mate would be more appropriate, though even the future status of that indulgence is up in the air. He chose to rescue his own miserable neck over remaining to fight for the power that rightfully was ours. How could I continue to associate myself with such a fool?"

"Mmmhmm, and did he happen to do that after you bit off more than you could chew and were on the losing end of a fight that you'd rushed head first into?" Ursula asked with a condescending smirk.

"My situation was hardly that dire," Jafar insisted.

"Sure it wasn't," Ursula said, clearly not believing him.

"If you have something more to say, then say it!" Jafar hissed. "I'll not indulge whatever sense of superiority you mistakenly believe you have."
A purple bubble appeared, floating over Jafar's map in front of the two villains. The smoke in the bubble cleared to reveal the image of Maleficent face to face with Jafar in Mozenrath's Black Sand trap.

"You're impulsive!" Maleficent scolded. "You never think things through! You wished to be a genie without knowing the cost, and even after fate bestowed upon you a second chance, you threw it all away on an ill advised battle with Sora. You're a talented wizard, but you have no sense of strategy."

Ursula patted Jafar on the shoulders. "And you still haven't learned that lesson, have you?"

"INSOLENCE! Just because Maleficent said it does NOT make it true," Jafar replied. "I know for someone like you, who has always groveled at her feet, that that must be a foreign notion."

"I don't grovel," Ursula said with an angry scoff. "But I do trust Maleficent and highly value her opinion. You would too if you knew what was good for you. You're failing to learn the same lesson that Hook just learned the hard way. You wanna keep dying alone like you did last time?"

"You know nothing, and you've little room to talk," Jafar sneered. "Now, if you've nothing constructive to contribute, kindly leave me in peace. We've not long before the others return."

"Fine, I'll go," Ursula said as she slithered away before stopping and turning back. "Though, really, a piece of advice: people like us have so few chances to be happy or find companionship. Don't throw away what you have because you're too obsessed with what you don't."

With her warning delivered, Ursula left Jafar alone with his thoughts. Jafar sneered and tried to turn his attention back to his work, but he found his mind continually betraying him and returning to Hook and Ursula's warning. *Ursula is dead wrong*, he told himself. Maybe eventually he'd even believe that.

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Storybrooke was slowly but surely recovering from Maleficent's attack. Many of the buildings destroyed in the fire had been rebuilt better than ever. The damage done to the spirit of the citizenry, however, was considerably harder to repair. Granny's Diner used to practically be bursting at the seams with people at dinner time on a Saturday, but now the place was a ghost town. Emma, Regina, and Belle had the restaurant to themselves, aside from one lone man sitting at the bar.

"How's Rumple adjusting to not being the Dark One anymore?" Regina asked, trying to maintain conversation to fill the void of silence.

Belle sighed and shook her head. "I thought he'd be different with the Dark One powers removed. I thought he'd give up power for good, but he's still obsessively cultivating and studying dark magic in the basement every night."

"How can he still use magic if he lost his powers?" Emma asked.

"There's always a way to get magic," Regina said. "Trust me, back when the curse had just broken, I was inhaling dark spells from my mother's spellbook to get my power back. Magic is as addictive as any drug, and Rumple's been using longer than any of us have been alive."

"And I'm trying to be understanding and patient with him," Belle said, "but he won't even consider going to talk to Archie for counseling. I just... I can't keep living with this. I thought I could with the Dark One gone, but our problems run deeper than any curse."

"Not like Archie even has time to take on any new client anyway," Regina said. "Since the fire, he's been swamped with grief counseling and PTSD treatment."
"And it's all my fault," Emma said somberly.

"Emma, you can't blame yourself for what happened," Belle urged.

"Can't I? Really?" Emma asked. "I let Maleficent into town, and I trusted Hook and didn't see what a scumbag he was until it was too late. And, on top of that, I'm the savior, but I haven't been able to save anybody lately. I don't even know how to start helping people."

Emma glanced over at the lone man at the bar. Prince Phillip had suffered worse than almost anyone else had after the fire. It seemed like he only ever spent his days at the bar any more.

"Well, there's a good place to start right over there," Regina said, gesturing over to him discreetly.

Emma nodded and walked over to the bar, sitting down next to Phillip. This close to him, Emma could smell the booze on his breath.

"How many does that one make?" Emma asked, nodding to the glass sitting in front of the prince.

"Can't remember," Phillip answered. "Doesn't really matter anymore though."

Phillip downed his drink and slid the empty glass to the edge of the counter.

"Aurora wouldn't want to see you like this," Emma said.

"Then it's a good thing she can't anymore," Phillip said with a sigh. "I must've fought a dozen dragons to rescue her back in the Enchanted Forest. But this time, when it really counted, I failed and my wife and my son paid the price."

"Nobody could've stopped Maleficent," Emma said. "A town full of knights and wizards and heroes, and she still destroyed everything. You couldn't have stopped what happened."

"Maybe not, but I at least should've died trying," Phillip said. "A father shouldn't outlive his son, especially when his son had barely begun to live."

"You're right," Emma said. "It's not fair what happened. But you've gotta find a new reason to live. This whole self destruction path won't make anything right. Aurora and Phillip Jr. would want you to keep living for them."

Phillip said nothing, but Emma could tell that her words had had some effect on him, even if it was only enough to convince him not to order another drink.

"Emma!" Regina said with urgency in her voice.

Emma turned to see Regina pointing to the window looking out onto main street. Emma glanced out to see what had startled Regina. The first thing she noticed was a handsome brunette man wearing a leather trench coat. Emma didn't recognize him, but she couldn't claim to know everyone in Storybrooke. Then Emma saw it. Walking alongside the unfamiliar man was the woman responsible for everyone's misery.

Maleficent had returned.

"I moved my pawn to H4," Loki said. "What'll be your next move, O' Mistress of Evil?"

"You mean to take my queen?" Maleficent said. "Not likely. Queen to G6."
"Pawn to H5 then," Loki said with a smirk. "Do be careful."

"I am not the one who lost his bishop," Maleficent said. "I'll simply return my queen to G5."

"And I shall move my queen to F3," Loki replied.

"Clever boy," Maleficent remarked. "You've almost trapped my queen... almost. Knight to G8."

"Bishop takes pawn at F4, threatens queen," Loki pressed onward.

Maleficent growled under her breath. "Queen to F6."

"It is quite unfortunate that you've developed nothing but your queen," Loki commented. "Now what exactly does that say about your willingness to trust others?"

"Your arrogance does you no credit, Loki," Maleficent responded. "Why, I could-"

"MALEFICENT!" Emma Swan yelled as she ran down the street from Granny's.

Emma and Regina both stopped a few yards away from the two Overtakers, determination and anger in both of their eyes.

"Friends of yours?" Loki asked.

"Pests would be a more apt term," Maleficent said to Loki before turning her attention back to the locals. "You both have witnessed my wrath firsthand. This time I am not here for the likes of you. Turn back at once lest you wish for your town to taste my fury once more."

Emma started to move forward, but Regina grabbed Emma's arm and held her back.

"Emma, wait," Regina warned. "She's too powerful. We can't risk a battle with her right now."

"She has to pay for what she did," Emma said.

"Emma, now you're talking like I used to," Regina said. "Vengeance isn't the answer right now. We don't even know what her other ally is capable of."

"Listen to your friend," Loki said. "She's obviously got the clearer head."

Emma took a deep breath but ultimately relented.

"This isn't over," Emma warned as she and Regina began to slowly back away from the Overtakers.

A whistling sound hissed through the night air, and Maleficent barely managed to raise her staff into the air to block an arrow aimed at her face. The arrow dissolved into ash when it wedged into the scepter. Maleficent turned her gaze towards the source of the arrow: a crossbow brandished by Prince Phillip, standing further down the street.

"MALEFICENT!" Phillip called out. "YOU'RE GOING TO PAY FOR ALL THE LIVES YOU'VE DESTROYED!"

Emerald flames began to radiate off of Maleficent's torso, and the various streetlights nearby began to sputter and spark. Emma, Regina, and Phillip all immediately knew that a terrible reckoning was about to come.

Maleficent glared daggers at her enemies as she delivered her final warning: "Wrong. Move."
Chapter End Notes

Lady Tremaine is from Cinderella.

Prince Phillip is from Once Upon a Time.
Daken was bored. No way around it. Back when it had been just him, Steve, Demyx, and the two Sanderson Sisters, he at least had people around who he could toy with and manipulate for power. Now with the entirety of the Overtakers back again, there were simply no opportunities to toy with people's lives without shortening his own in the process. As much as he enjoyed the company of like-minded people, they were far more difficult to manipulate, and he was promised greater rewards by cooperating for the time being.

Still, with many of the Overtakers off on missions while he remained back home with little to do, boredom was enduring. There was simply nothing for him right now. Nothing. A word that defined Daken's life. Daken's mind drifted back to his exchange with Steve back in the Spider-Carnage wasteland New York:

"This whole mortal coil has taught me that beyond absolute power, everything else is nothing."

"I used to feel like that before I met Russell," Steve said. "He showed me that there was a whole wide world of stuff that I was missin'. Maybe... maybe you just need a Russell."

"I've never exactly been one for meaningful relationship bullshit," Daken said.

"Never too late to give it a try," Steve said with a shrug.

Daken flitted through paramours without much care, and he never really thought anything meaningful could ever be in the cards for him. Daken wasn't even sure he knew how to have a relationship without manipulating the other person. Though that was probably a moot point. After all, it wasn't as if a potential significant other was going to just walk through the door.

"Oh pardon me," Ardyn said as he entered the room. "Getting used to the lay of the land is proving to be a more difficult feat than I had realized. Between this castle and the Eminence Palace, it's a wonder anyone manages to find anyone else. But forgive me, we haven't been formally introduced."

Ardyn removed his hat and took a bow. "Ardyn Lucis Caelum, but most know me as Ardyn Izunia."

"Akihiro, but everyone calls me Daken," he replied. "You're the guy they picked up in the Underworld?"

"Indeed I am, though I had the pleasure of meeting several Overtakers back before my untimely demise," Ardyn answered. "Though you were not among that particular party. I would have remembered a face as handsome as yours."

"Oh, I see, you're the Overtakers' new bullshit guy," Daken said with a smirk.

"I'd hardly venture to replace Mr. Newlin in that regard," Ardyn quipped. "After all, cameras do have a tendency to depict my hair in most unflattering ways."

"A comb might help with that," Daken said. "Though I do love the color. Is it dyed that shade of magenta or is that a natural shade on your world?"

"Not a common shade, but not one I gained artificially, I can assure you," Ardyn said. "I enjoy its uniqueness, something I see you are very familiar with."
Ardyn gestured to Daken's own hair, styled in a mohawk. Daken ran his fingers over it in response.

"I do like to stand out," Daken confessed. "But I've actually been hiding my whole life. Even now that people can see me, they still don't know what I am."

"And what are you?" Ardyn asked.

Daken held his index finger to his lips. "That's my little secret."

"A man wearing a mask whilst bearing his true face," Ardyn remarked with a smirk.

"No one shows their true face, ever," Daken said. "Masks hide reality, or we become who we pretend to be."

Ardyn grinned at that. "Then from one masked man to another, I count myself quite fortuitous to be in the company of another who recognizes the masquerade."

Daken couldn't help but smile a bit at that. He had to admit that Ardyn was charming and not half-bad to look at either. Of course, that just made Ardyn more dangerous in his way. Everyone in Villain's Vale was a powerful and dangerous threat, and they all had the potential to give the others trouble if they were so inclined. Daken couldn't afford to be too charmed by his new associate.

"Look, all I'm sayin' is that subcontracting ends up being cheaper in the long run," Hades explained to Russell as they entered the room. "If I let Pain and Panic do a job, I end paying for it to get done twice when they screw up."

"That's true, but you forfeit your ability to ensure everything is exactly the way you want it," Russell countered. "I'd rather keep all my operations in my name, eat the cost, and write it off on my tax returns later because then I don't have to rely on somebody else's slack standards messin' up my operations."

"Babe, you are a control freak, and I mean that it the nicest possible way," Hades said.

"I never pretended otherwise," Russell said with a laugh.

"Ah hello hello!" Ardyn said. "Lovely to see you both again! And how are we doing on this marvelous day?"

"Oy, could be better. I sent that Demyx clown to deal with our missing prisoner problem," Hades said.

"We have a missing prisoner problem?" Daken asked.

"Apparently while you were rescuin' Steve, Demyx let the Xehanorts get killed," Russell said. "Through some convoluted bullshit, that means they're now real people, free as fuckin' birds."

"I am so tired of this Nobody-Xehanort-crockery," Hades said with an exasperated sigh. "The sooner we put that chapter of our lives to bed ETERNALLY, the better."

"Oh surely we're not that bad," a silky voice cooed from seemingly nowhere.

Hades, Russell, Ardyn, and Daken all immediately readied themselves for combat as three Corridors of Darkness deposited Marluxia, Larxene, and Luxord in the room with them.

"We thought we might return your property personally," Luxord said as he held up a playing card with Demyx's face on it.
"You fucks must have a death wish," Russell said through bared fangs. "We wiped the floor with y'all last time. What makes you think this time it'll go any better?"

"Because this time, we're on the same side," Marluxia said.

"Somebody call up Bolgia two of the Eighth Circle," Hades said, "because I've just found a big pile of-"

"Oh, but I think you'll want to know who killed us and why," Marluxia interrupted. "And it may also interest you to learn that the same man who killed us in league with your father, Cronus."

"Audacious to bargain in such a manner," Ardyn remarked.

"Okay fine, you've got my attention," Hades said. "We can work out a deal. But first, I need a little show of good faith. Give me the name of the PUNK behind our little jail break."

"Very well," Marluxia said. "The culprit is a man you already know. The man behind it all is Xigbar."

Cinderella's guests filed into the large ballroom of her castle, many dressed in fine gowns and expensive suits but just as many wearing the clothes of commoners. Cinderella did not judge. She wanted all of her subjects to be able to attend her celebration. Grimhilde, hidden behind her peddler's disguise, did not rouse suspicion or draw any unwanted attention. As far as Cinderella and the wretched Keyblade heroes were concerned, Grimhilde was nothing more than a harmless old woman who'd come to bask in the glow of the aristocracy.

"The other Overtakers will stagger their arrivals so as to not arouse suspicion," Lady Tremaine, dressed in an elegant blue silk dress, whispered to Grimhilde from the opposite side of the refreshments table.

"Excellent," Grimhilde replied as she hobbled over to the large pile of gifts waiting for dear Cinderella.

Grimhilde hated being back in this old and decrepit body. It reminded her all too painfully of the way the Master reduced her to a weak and sickly fool. This time, however, the fearsome Evil Queen had her dark magic still in tact. The disguise would go away once the time came for the grand reveal, though that moment couldn't come soon enough. Grimhilde checked around her to ensure that no one was watching before she turned her attention back to the presents.

"Here's a gift they'll never forget!" Grimhilde said as her hands radiated dark magic.

From the top of the gift pile, a large red package resembling a luscious apple tied with emerald green ribbon manifested at the queen's behest. Satisfied that her devious trap was in play, Grimhilde turned to walk back to the dance floor just in time to see King Mickey, Queen Minnie, Donald, Goofy, Sora, Riku, and Kairi walking in.

"Cinderella!" Mickey said as he gave the princess a big hug. "Thanks for invitin' us to your castle! It's beautiful!"

"It was my pleasure, Mickey!" Cinderella said as she gave hugs to the rest of the group.

"Gosh, it's gonna be swell sharin' this evenin' with all our pals here," Mickey said. "Isn't it, Minnie?"

"Uh-huh," Minnie agreed. "And look at all of those wonderful gifts that you've got, Cinderella!"
Minnie gestured to the assortment of packages with every variety of wrapping in every color.

"Hmm, that's funny," Cinderella said, noticing the red box left by Grimhilde. "I don't remember this one."

"It must be a surprise package," Goofy suggested.

"LET'S OPEN IT!" Sora and Donald shouted in unison.

"There'll be time for gifts a little later," Prince Charming said with a laugh as he joined the group. "For now, mingle a bit and enjoy the ball."

"I need to attend to my other guests, but please enjoy the celebration," Cinderella said with a warm smile as she and the prince took off into the crowd.

As Cinderella and the prince mingled with their guests, they brushed right by Ursula and Jafar, disguised as "Vanessa" and as an old man with a long white beard.

"What is this? A bargain bin old man costume?" Ursula asked, critiquing Jafar's disguise. "If you needed money, you could've just asked."

"You're one to talk," Jafar hissed. "Wearing a disguise that Sora's already seen you in? You'll bow our cover in an instant!"

"Do you two really have bicker like that when we're all linked together by magic? I didn't sign up to listen to a grouchy old married couple's podcast," Cruella's voice echoed inside Jafar and Ursula's minds thanks to a connection spell forged by Grimhilde that allowed the Overtakers to all communicate from opposite sides of the ballroom.

For her disguise, Cruella had set aside her furs and worn a dress patterned after a Chinese dragon with her hair worn hidden in a large hat with a veil and mask to obscure her face. It wasn't subtle, but it, at the very least, made Cruella relatively unrecognizable.

"Enough," Grimhilde whispered. "It's not as though any of you three have the worst disguise here."

"Were you makin' fun of my costume-y?" Pete asked, chiming in.

"Did you even bother to look in the mirror before we left?" Cruella asked with a scoff.

Pete was dressed in a yellow and blue gown with a short black wig and unevenly applied makeup that he insisted made him look like Snow White. Naturally, his "disguise" did nothing to hide his true identity other than to frustrate Grimhilde.

"Y'all are just jealous cuz I'm the fairest of 'em all," Pete said with a most unlady-like laugh.

"My wretched stepdaughter is not the fairest," Grimhilde declared. "Nor would anyone ever mistake you for Snow White."

"Hey! Snow White!" Sora shouted as he ran up to Pete. "I didn't know you were going to be here!"

"Then again, perhaps I have underestimated the stupidity of our enemies," Grimhilde grumbled.

"Oh hi Sora!" Pete said in a high pitched voice that sounded nothing like Snow White's actual voice. "It's good to see you again!"

Sora, of course, noticed that Pete was a great deal fatter and hairier than Snow White had been the
last time he saw her, but Sora was far too polite to point that out.

"It's good to see you too!" Sora said. "Y'know, your stepmother's been making trouble on a bunch of different worlds lately, but don't worry, we've got it covered."

"I'm so glad!" Pete said. "That old woman is just dreadful! She's so irritable, and her breath smells like rotten apples!"

"Watch it, you imbecilic oaf!" Grimhilde hissed.

"We'll keep you and the other princesses safe," Sora assured his companion. "But I gotta run. We'll catch up again later!"

Sora took off into the crowd with a wave, leaving Pete behind.

"I'm embarrassed that I ever lost to that fool," Ursula said.

"I stand by my belief that Aladdin was the only reason he ever defeated me," Jafar remarked.

"Get ready, everyone," Lady Tremaine chimed in. "The duck and the dog are approaching the gift."

Donald was right up on the large red box, looking at it with desire and temptation. Goofy was a few feet away, trying to figure out his friend's interest in the package.

"Donald, what are you doin'?" Goofy asked. "That present doesn't belong to ya!"

"Aw phooey," Donald replied. "I just want a little peak!"

"A little peak?" Goofy asked. "But-

But Goofy was took late. Donald had already undone the latch and lifted the lid of the present ever so slightly. However, as soon as he did, the lid swung open to reveal the somber face of the spirit of the magic mirror on the underside. Thunder crackled, drawing the attention of everyone in the ballroom as wisps of darkness poured from the package. The ballroom and, indeed, the rest of the castle began to transform from bright and cheerful to dark and sinister. Even the heraldry took the shape of Grimhilde's royal crest.

"Uh-oh," Donald said sheepishly as he and Goofy tried without success to close the package.

Shadow and soldier Heartless started to manifest amidst the crowd, sending the guests running about in panic. Sora, Riku, King Mickey, and Kairi immediately sprung into action, cutting down the dark invaders. However, for every Heartless that they struck down, two more sprouted up in its place. It was as if the power of the box was allowing an unlimited army of Heartless to appear in the castle despite all of the protection spells in place.

Grimhilde cackled wickedly as she hobbled up to a raised platform on one side of the ballroom. "I knew you fools would fall for my little scheme!"

"Mickey! Sora! What's going on?" Cinderella asked, distress dripping in her voice.

Grimhilde's witchy cackles morphed into a queenly chortle as Grimhilde's hag disguise gave way to her Evil Queen apparel. The entire congregation froze and their eyes locked on her as if there was no one else in the world.

"The Castle of Dreams?" Grimhilde said with a sneer. "Well now it's time to share my dreams! This castle now belongs to me! So sorry to spoil your festivities. And as for YOU!"
Grimhilde pointed to Cinderella, locking eyes with the princess.

"Don't you have some scrubbing to do?" Grimhilde asked with a smirk.

In a swirl of magic, Cinderella's beautiful gown vanished, leaving her in the humble rags that she had been forced to wear in her stepmother's estate. Cinderella gasped at the transformation and then again when a firm hand clutched her upper arm. Cinderella saw the sinister half-smile of Lady Tremaine staring down at her.

"Come, child, it is time for you to pay for your treachery," Lady Tremaine said as she pulled Cinderella away.

"Hey! That's enough!" Sora shouted as he tried to rush after them, but he quickly found his path blocked by the arrival of a new hoard of Heartless.

"This is turning out to be splendid celebration after all," Grimhilde said with a smile. "Now, allow me to add to the guest list!"

With a clap of thunder and a chorus of raucous laughter, the disguises of the other Overtakers melted away, revealing Ursula, Jafar, Cruella De Vil, and Pete to the crowd.

"It's the Overtakers!" Riku said.

"We can take 'em!" Sora declared.

"We have to save my wife!" Prince Charming said with urgency in his voice.

A group of Heartless appeared on Donald's left, prompting the court mage of Disney Castle to draw his staff. Then a second group of Heartless appeared on his right, prompting Donald to let out a quack in surprise. By the time a third squadron of Heartless appeared right in front of him, Donald was feeling quite overwhelmed. Then came a tap on his shoulder from behind. Donald turned around slowly to find himself face to face with Ursula.

"Boo," she said nonchalantly.

Donald suddenly felt very light-headed and fainted right where he was, earning a sinister cackle from Ursula.

"Oh, well done darling," Cruella said in a sultry voice as she cozied up next to Grimhilde. "I'm quite fond of your eye for redecorating. You'll have to spare a wing of this castle for me."

Grimhilde beamed at the praise. She knew Cruella was flattering her to get something for herself, but Grimhilde didn't really mind. After all, Cruella wouldn't have complimented the decorations if she didn't truly mean it. The woman's eye for style, at least, was brutally honest no matter what.

"Jafar, dispose of these trespassers," Grimhilde ordered.

"With pleasure," Jafar cooed with a dramatic flouncing of his cape.

However, before he could muster a spell, Jafar found that his cape had caught fire thanks to a well aimed spell from Riku. Jafar let out an incoherent yell as he attempted to put out his burning cloak.

"GET THEM!" Grimhilde shrieked.

"Everybody! Scatter!" Mickey ordered.
No one had to be told twice. The entire crowd began to run amuck aimlessly, creating utter pandemonium as the villains attempted to chase the heroes through the wild crowd. Minnie and Kairi made their way to an adjacent room that seemed to be used primarily for storage. The room's most notable features were a large skylight in the ceiling looking out at the stars above and an old fashioned mahogany wardrobe on the far wall.

"Do you think we can stop them?" Kairi asked, panting. "I can't really fight in this dress or these shoes."

"There's gotta be a way," Minnie replied. "That strange present was what caused it. It's made of darkness, so maybe there's a way to destroy it with light!"

"Well, well, lookie here," Pete bellowed with a laugh as he strolled into the room. "Why, if it ain't the wannabe princess and the mousey lil' queenie."

"PETE!" Minnie shouted, indignantly. "You stop this right now!"

Pete hesitated a moment as if he were being scolded by his mother before putting back on a fierce face. "Nice try, your majesty, but I ain't listenin' to you anymore, see? Now, we can do this the easy way or the not-so-easy way. Hand over the keys to Disney Castle, or I'm gonna clobber you."

"That will never happen, Pete!" Minnie declared. "Kairi, quick, into the wardrobe!"

Kairi and Minnie both scurried over to the wardrobe and slipped inside, shutting the doors tight. Pete simply laughed.

"Aww, the cute lil' girlies are hidin' from me," Pete taunted. "That's why ya don't send a bunch of women-folk to do a man's job, see? Ready or not, ladies, here I come!"

Pete threw open the wardrobe doors, revealing an empty interior. Pete scratched his head in confusion and looked around for Minnie and Kairi. Wondering if the wardrobe had a false back or if it was somehow bigger on the inside, Pete stepped fully into the wardrobe and knocked on the back wall.

"Yoohoo!" Minnie called out.

Pete turned around to see Minnie and Kairi waving to Pete from the outside of the wardrobe. He barely had time to realize what they were doing before they shut and locked the wardrobe doors with him on the inside. Pete banged on the doors and shouted at the two heroes to let him out.

"Kairi, cover your eyes!" Minnie warned.

"Oh no, this ain't gonna be good," Pete bemoaned from within the wardrobe.

"LIGHT!" Minnie called out.

A pillar of bright white light appeared underneath the wardrobe and propelled it through the skylight, hurdling the wardrobe with Pete inside of it off into the distance. Kairi and Minnie shared a hug and a quick high-five.

"Not bad for a couple of 'little girlies'," Kairi said with a laugh.

Goofy and Prince Charming, meanwhile, ran out onto the castle's battlements. A few Heartless arrived to stand in their way, but Goofy made quick work of them.
"We have to find Cinderella!" Prince Charming insisted. "Her stepmother could have taken her anywhere by now."

"Then she's probably not in the castle any more," Goofy said.

"Maybe we can make our way down through the back staircase," Prince Charming suggested.

"Not a chance!" Cruella shouted as she ran out after them, a bedazzled pistol in hand. "You two mongrels aren't going anywhere!"

"Oh my gawrsh! She's got a gun!" Goofy shouted as he ducked behind his shield.

"Yes indeed," Cruella said. "Now, I would so hate to get blood all over Grimmie's new castle, but I will if you fools don't surrender!"

"I'll never surrender! Not while Cinderella is still in danger!" Prince Charming declared.

Cruella knew that she couldn't make good on her threat without her ability to kill, but she couldn't let Goofy or the prince know that. She'd have to double down on her bluff and bluff even harder. Fortunately, Goofy seemed to be helping her along.

"Charming, no!" Goofy said. "Guns are dangerous weapons. She'll kill ya!"

"That's right, I will!" Cruella declared. "Don't think for a moment I won't end your wretched life! But if you're so ready to die for your princess, then I'd start thinking about some final words if I were you!"

"In that case, I have only two final words," Prince Charming said.

Before Cruella could really comprehend what Charming was up to, he dashed over to a lever on the wall and pulled it.

"Trap door!" he said as the floor underneath Cruella gave way.

Cruella shrieked in anger as she plummeted down through the trap door and landed with a splash in the water below. From up above, with her flailing limbs and her massive fur coat rolling about in the water, she looked like someone being strangled by a vicious sea otter.

"Let's get goin' before another one of them Overtakers shows up!" Goofy said.

Sora, Riku, and Mickey were locked in a practically endless battle against the swarms of Heartless to keep them from terrorizing the guests fleeing the ballroom. So far, they'd been successful in keeping everyone safe, but exhaustion was setting in and the Heartless just kept coming.

"Don't let up!" Mickey said as he sliced through two shadow Heartless. "We've almost cleared the ballroom!"

Sora subdued a soldier Heartless and sighed at the sight of more coming his way. He glanced over to see how Riku and Mickey were doing, but what he saw was of much greater concern than a few Heartless.

"LOOK OUT!" Sora shouted.

But he was too late. Riku and Mickey both were snatched up by Ursula's tentacles and hoisted over to the sea witch.
"Look at the catch of the day!" Ursula chuckled wickedly.

"I look forward to fileting these two bottom-feeders," Jafar remarked with a sinister grin. "But first, we've an imbecilic boy to deal with."

Sora was weak and tired, and dealing with Jafar and Ursula at the same time would be an impossible task, especially with Riku and Mickey in danger. He had to call for help.

"Give me strength!" Sora called out as he clutched his summon gem.

A big blue puff of smoke billowed up above Sora with a holler. Ursula was perplexed, but Jafar knew exactly what had happened.

"Oh no," Jafar groaned.

"Heeeeeeere's GENIE!" the big blue Genie of the lamp declared as he took shape. "It's great to be back, playin' the castle!"

Genie then noticed Jafar glaring daggers in his direction. "Oh hey! It's Señor Psychopath! Long time, no see! Hope you don't mind though if I stay Ja-FAR away from you."

"Now you understand what I've had to deal with," Jafar said to Ursula.

"Okay, you win, he is more annoying than Triton's loudmouth crab," Ursula agreed.

"And I see you're hanging out with Divine's megalomaniacal twin sister," Genie announced as he transformed into a drag queen with a large blonde wig. "Girl, you are serving me real fish! Shantay you stay! But Jafar, you can go ahead and sashay away!"

"Irritating pest!" Jafar hissed as he fired bolts of red lightning at Genie.

"IN COMING!" Genie shouted as he dodged the blasts. "MAYDAY! MAYDAY!"

Genie's dodging took him amidst the crowd of ball guests who had not yet evacuated. Genie put up a blue deflection spell to protect them from Jafar's wrath.

"Hey! How ya doin'? Love the outfit!" Genie said as he weaved through the crowd, dodging blasts from Jafar and Ursula both now. "Whoops! Did ya miss me?"

"Time to FINISH HIM!" Ursula growled.

Jafar began to radiate bright purple as Ursula channeled her magic into the sorcerer. Genie didn't seem to be paying attention and summoned up a handheld mirror to admire himself.

"Oh, look, a mirror!" Genie declared, waving the mirror around. "It must be for queenie over there."

"ZIMBA, ZAMBA, ZALABOO!" Jafar chanted as he unleashed a powerful blast of magic combining his own sorcery with that of Ursula's.

"Right back at ya!" Genie said as he held up the mirror, causing the spell to ricochet off the glass and fly back at the two Overtakers.

Jafar and Ursula didn't have time to deflect or dodge before their own spell slammed back into them. The Overtakers screamed in rage as their banishing spell hurled them both into another dimension. Ursula dropped Riku and Mickey before she vanished, and the two got to their feet quickly. At the same time, Minnie, Kairi, Goofy, and Prince Charming returned to the ballroom.
"Four down and one to go!" Genie said as he vanished into a plume of smoke, his summon period ended.

"This castle belongs to ME!" Grimhilde shouted. "And I don't need any help to destroy the likes you of you!"

To cement the point, dozens of Heartless appeared around her, including a pair of Guard Armors and Trickmasters. The entire hero party was tired, and a battle against Grimhilde and all of these Heartless would not be ideal, even with their strength in numbers.

"Oh goodness gracious!" the Fairy Godmother said as she appeared in the ballroom. "This wasn't the way this evening was supposed to go at all! Time to put the lid back on someone's evil gift!"

"Say good-bye to your little friends, you foolish old woman!" Grimhilde threatened.

"Not this time!" the Fairy Godmother replied. "Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!"

A beam of light fired from the Fairy Godmother's wand and smashed into Grimhilde's present, sealing the lid and causing the box to dissolve back into the darkness.

"NO!" Grimhilde shrieked as her Heartless disappeared right before her eyes.

Grimhilde could feel the castle's magical protection spells returning as well. If she didn't retreat now, she'd find herself stranded without the ability to open a new Corridor of Darkness. Grimhilde twirled around with her cape and vanished into the darkness, her wicked scheme thwarted.

"Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!" the Fairy Godmother chanted again, allowing castle to return to its former appearance.

"Hey, look!" Kairi said.

"Everything's turning back to the way it was!" Mickey said.

"Oh, isn't this wonderful!" Minnie declared.

"Lady Tremaine still has Cinderella!" Prince Charming reminded everyone. "Fairy Godmother, we must save her!"

The Fairy Godmother summoned a ball of magic and, with a flash of light, teleported two figures back into the ballroom.

"Insolent girl!" Tremaine roared. "You will learn to respect my-

Lady Tremaine was just about to strike Cinderella with the back of her hand when she realized that her setting had changed. Tremaine looked about in confusion, her mouth hanging open in disbelief upon seeing that the heroes had won.

"No, this cannot be!" Tremaine shrieked.

"Guards! Seize that woman!" Prince Charming ordered.

Before Tremaine could run for the door, she was restrained by the royal guards, who slapped handcuffs onto her wrists.

"Take her away from here," Prince Charming ordered as he rushed over and knelt beside his wife.
"No, this was my time to win!" Tremaine shouted as she was dragged away to the dungeon. "I cannot be defeated again! You will unhand me! No!"

With a flick of her wrist, the Fairy Godmother transformed Cinderella's rags back into the beautiful silver ballgown. Cinderella rose to her feet and twirled around to take in the sensation of being back in her dress.

"Oh, thank you, Fairy Godmother!" Cinderella said as she rushed over to embrace her dear friend.

"You're welcome, dear," the Fairy Godmother said before turning back to Sora and his friends. "But they're the ones who deserve the credit. If it hadn't been for your friends here, everything would still be a mess!"

"Thank you all so much," Cinderella said with a grin. "I can't thank you enough for saving my dream."

Donald suddenly blinked his eyes open and jumped to his feet. "Huh? Where did that queen go? Let me at her!"

"Sorry, Donald, she just poofed," Goofy said. "Disappeared."

"Welp, I guess I showed her!" Donald boasted.

"Yeah, right, Donald," Sora said. "You were a chicken the whole time!"

"I'm NOT a chicken!" Donald squawked angrily.

"Yeah, he's a duck," Goofy corrected, earning laughs from everyone else.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Cinderella asked. "I believe we still have a party to get back to!"

And so they did. It was a night filled with dancing and music, where true love and true friendship reigned supreme, and no evil forces threatened their celebration again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was heavily based on and closely adapts the now defunct Walt Disney World show Cinderella's Surprise Celebration.
Maleficent radiated flames as she faced her enemies: Emma Swan, Regina Mills, and Prince Phillip. With a dramatic motion of her staff, Maleficent unleashed an immense ball of green fire directly for her three opponents. Emma raised her hands to block the curse, but the orb of flames seemed to halt in midair a couple feet in front of the three heroes. It was so close that they could feel the heat radiating off from it.

"What?" Maleficent hissed in anger.

The flames fizzled out, and, as they did, a figure in a tattered grey and black cloak that obscured his face materialized in between the Overtakers and the heroes.

"You dare to interfere in my affairs?" Maleficent asked.

The cloaked figure said nothing in response. He simply flicked his wrist and vanished along with Emma, Regina, and Phillip into a puff of black smoke, leaving Maleficent and Loki alone in the middle of the street.

"The stench of that magic seemed familiar," Loki remarked.

"Indeed," Maleficent nodded. "It reminded me of Xehanort... Though it was distinct in its own right."

"Could Xehanort have set up a contingency plan?" Loki asked.

"A concern for later," Maleficent answered. "We have more pressing matters with which to attend."

With the threat now passed, the two Overtakers returned to their path towards the library.

Doom slowly blinked as he awoke, the glaring sunlight burning his eyes and forcing them to close and open them repeatedly until they adjusted to the brightness. Doom sat up, and, as he did, he could feel the full soreness of his body as his joints practically cried out in pain. Physical pain would pass. His current surroundings interested Doom far more. All around him was a beautiful and lush valley that looked nothing like anywhere in Latveria. He had no recollection of this spot or what had happened to get him here.

"Ah, Victor, you're awake," a sultry woman's voice said.

Doom didn't have to turn to identify who the voice belonged to.

"You will keep my given name out of your whore mouth, Amora," Doom growled as he rose to his feet. "I am only Doctor Doom to you."

Amora rolled her eyes at Doom's objections. "Is that really any way to speak to the woman who saved your miserable life?"

Doom could barely remember what had transpired. The last thing he remembered, he'd arrived back in Latveria to reclaim his kingdom and then...
"Morgan le Fay," Doom said, remembering.

"Indeed," Amora said. "Your time magics collided and threw you both into the time stream. It is most fortuitous that I found you before Morgan did."

"Why did you save me, Amora?" Doom asked, his hand drifting to his forehead.

"Can I not simply come to the aid of an old friend?" Amora asked with a grin.

"You were in league with Morgan le Fay and Mephisto once before," Doom reminded Amora, leaning in close to her face so that she could see the intensity and fury in his eyes. "It is quite possible that this is some deception on Morgan's behalf."

"I am no puppet of that cow! She is merely a witch; I am a goddess! Are you so blind not to see that?" Amora shouted, though upon seeing Doom's continued look of distrust, she relented. "I also felt that I owed you recompense for my part in Loki's capture by Mephisto a while back. And I still have an interest in joining your Overtaker organization. I thought perhaps by helping you that you would vouch for my admission."

"And what exactly is your interest in the Overtakers?" Doom probed further. "Last I'd heard, you were occupying the throne of Asgard itself, an action that Loki, I might add, will not forgive."

"Perhaps I simply enjoy the company of like-minded individuals," Amora suggested.

"Or perhaps you lost Asgard the moment Odin quelled the invasion of darkness, and now you seek refuge from his wrath," Doom said.

"You and Loki are already avoiding Odin," Amora said with a shrug. "What's the addition of another under that same umbrella? Surely helping the woman who saved you from an eternity trapped between seconds would not be so nettlesome a task."

"And, I assume, if I refuse, you'll maroon me on this world with no method of escape," Doom added.

"Naturally," Amora nodded.

Though Amora couldn't see it, Doom was grinning beneath his mask. He admired the sorceress's talents and prowess in manipulation. Many saw Amora as a second rate version of Loki, but Doom knew that Amora brought her own unique talents to the table. He chose her for the inner circle of his Masters of Evil because he saw her value clearly then, as he did now. She'd be a useful asset to the Overtakers if she was, indeed, sincere about cooperating.

"Very well, Amora," Doom said. "You shall have my support in joining the Overtakers, provided that you continue to prove trustworthy. Now return me to the Overtaken Kingdom at once! With Morgan le Fay occupying my kingdom, I shall have to take extensive measures to drive the harlot out."

Amora snapped her fingers and opened a Corridor of Darkness that looked quite out of place against the lush cheerfulness of the meadow.

Amora gestured a perfectly manicured hand to the portal. "After you... partner."

Maleficent, Loki, Imperious, Fish, and Hook gathered in the expansive catacombs beneath the Storybrooke library. The maze of caverns that all looked alike made Hook's presence essential, for he...
was the only one who'd been through these caverns before. The five villains arrived at a plateau that seemed to drop off even further down into the caverns. A broken glass coffin sat in the center of the cavern.

"This is the place," Hook explained. "This is where my world's version of Maleficent meant her most unhappy ending."

"There are powerful magics at work in this cavern," Imperious noted.

"Aye, Regina said that the chamber preserves Maleficent in any form," Hook answered. "Last I saw her, she was a gruesome ghoul composed entirely of ashes, though Greg and Tamara rendered her inert. The ashes scattered throughout this chamber belong to her."

Maleficent tapped the base of her staff against the stone, and, at her command, the ashes began to gather in a single pile in front of the five Overtakers.

"Are you going to resurrect your other self?" Fish asked.

"There is only room for one Maleficent in this universe," Maleficent answered. "But the power of my alternate counterpart shall not go to waste."

The orb atop Maleficent's staff began to glow a sickly green, and the pile of ashes took on the same hue. The ashes began to swirl around Maleficent, creating an iridescent maelstrom of greens. Though initially glowing brightly, the swirling magic slowly but surely began to thin out as Maleficent absorbed its power into her own body. After a minute, the ashes were nowhere to be found. Maleficent exhaled and took in the sensation of her added power. She felt stronger, yes, but, more than stronger, she felt like more of herself. It was almost as if her very identity had been reaffirmed.

"Was that really all that we came here for?" Loki asked with a groan. "Did that really require all of us?"

"A precautionary measure," Maleficent answered. "I knew not what sort of opposition we may have encountered. Besides, I thought you might have appreciated the chance to get out of the castle."

"So you really don't have any plan whatsoever," Loki said; it was not a question. "You were simply out to amplify your own power whilst relegating the Overtakers to body guards. Is that all we are to you?"

"Mind your tone!" Maleficent warned.

"And here I thought I was joining in the conquest of the universe," Imperious chimed in, "not playing security for dusting."

"That's enough from you Imperious," Maleficent hissed.

Fish put her hand on Maleficent's shoulder. "I think we're all just a little tired and on edge after the debacle with the Master. Let's just head back to the castle for now."

"What about my vengeance?" Hook asked.

"Oh yes, because that worked out so well for you last time," Loki remarked.

"If you wish to remain behind and rejoin the rest of us later, you may," Maleficent stated.

Hook nodded and took off back down the tunnel back to Storybrooke proper. Maleficent thought
him foolish to rush off into a battle with Rumplestiltskin, but she had to admire his tenacity. Revenge before pleasure, after all. Maleficent opened a Corridor of Darkness, and Loki and Imperious both strutted through the dark portal with a huff. Fish hung back with Maleficent for a moment.

"If I can be so bold as to offer my advice," Fish said. "You brought the Overtakers together to rule together through our combined talents. Maybe if you let us all put our heads together, we could decide our new path as a team."

With that said, Fish stepped through the dark corridor, leaving Maleficent alone. As much as Maleficent hated to admit it, she had nothing, and her continued attempts to stall weren't buying her any time to figure it out. She liked to appear in control and powerful, a leader worthy of inspiring fear in her subordinates, but perhaps she still needed to realize the value of her allies in the Overtakers.

The decision was plain to see, and with it made, she stepped through the Corridor of Darkness back to the Eminence Palace.

Grimhilde stared at her reflection in the mirror, the sting of her defeat still fresh in her mind. Despite all her planning and all her power, Sora and his wretched friends bested her yet again. She'd yet to face Maleficent regarding the defeat, but she could guess her leader's reaction quite easily. At the very least, the other Overtakers mostly had some value or victory to their name. Grimhilde, however, had only ever been of use as a supporting player in other villains' battles, and after a month spent indisposed and useless as a sickly crone, she could feel the ice cold breath of irrelevance on the back of her neck.

Grimhilde saw her companion's visage in the mirror but did not turn around to face her.

"I thought I might find you here, darling," Cruella said. "I just expected that hideous old theater mask to be lurking behind the glass."

"There is little reason to consult the slave in the mirror," Grimhilde stated. "I've no questions that I do not already know the answer to."

"Soooo, you were just brooding?" Cruella asked.

"Do not mock me!" Grimhilde warned.

"Oh, darling, I would never," Cruella said with mock sincerity. "But in all seriousness, you can't let a simple defeat get you down. Worrying about those things causes wrinkles, after all."

"Then I shall be old and hideous in addition to a failure," Grimhilde bemoaned.

"That's not what I meant," Cruella said. "I only meant that these things do, regretta... regrettably, happen and you shouldn't fret."

"Shouldn't fret?" Grimhilde asked as she turned around from the mirror. "Your intent is appreciated, but you are far from easing my mind."

"Then perhaps a distraction instead?" Cruella offer. "Let's have a little girls' night! Dinner! Oh do come!"

It felt wrong to go out to celebrate after a humiliating failure. However, Grimhilde was admittedly feeling hungry, and the prospect of spending the evening with Cruella was far more appealing than continuing to feel sorry for herself.
"Very well," Grimhilde agreed.

It turned out Cruella's idea of a girls' night out for dinner involved traveling to an Earth territory in a land known as "Orlando, Florida" to eat at a fast food joint called Mr. Cluck's Chicken Shack. Cruella and Grimhilde sat across from each other at a booth on the far side of the restaurant. Cruella wolfed down her Double Cluck Combo as Grimhilde prodded at hers with a plastic fork.

"This is strange way to prepare fowl," Grimhilde remarked as she peeled away the fried breading from her chicken breast.

"Grimme, no, that's the best part!" Cruella said between bites.

Grimhilde didn't see how it could possibly be. To avoid garnering unwanted attention, both villainesses had opted for evening wear that downplayed their recognizability. Cruella's iconic black and white hair was tucked up in a stylish black fedora that hid her unique locks from the casual onlooker, and without one of her fur coats, she was practically invisible. Grimhilde, out of queenly garments, was unrecognizable to anyone who did not know her personally. Her black hair was worn up in a bun, and she wore a plain purple colored blouse with a black skirt.

"So, darling, I've been wanting to get to know you better," Cruella said. "I mean, obviously, you're the most like me out of anyone in our Overtakers."

Grimhilde smiled. "I would have thought you'd have seen more of yourself in Ursula or Ms. Mooney."

"Hardly," Cruella scoffed. "They're a fun couple of gals, but they care more about power and control than anything."

"And you don't?" Grimhilde asked

"I wouldn't be in the Overtakers if I didn't," Cruella said. "but the difference is that my first priority is beauty and style, with cruelty and malice to those who cross me as a close second, and power as a solid third. And I can tell you're exactly the same. Tell me I'm wrong."

Grimhilde nodded. "You are not wrong. Though I must say, you're certainly more wild and carefree than I am. I envy that in you."

"I'd better not order anything apple related for a while if you're envying me," Cruella replied with a smirk. "Though, really, you just need to give yourself permission. You already get wild and revel in your own wickedness when you turn into the hag. Just because you look like a queen now doesn't mean you can't still have fun."

"I shall take that under consideration," Grimhilde nodded.

Given the restaurant's proximity to Walt Disney World, the music that played throughout the restaurant was largely composed of Disney songs. It felt as though "Let it Go" had come on five times since the villainesses had sat down. However, it wasn't long before something far worse began to play over the sound system...

"Cruella De Vil, Cruella De Vil. If she doesn't scare you, no evil thing will!"

Cruella slapped her menu back down to the table and ran her tongue along the inside of her cheek as a scowl cracked onto her face.

"You know, I should have skinned Roger instead," Cruella declared. "This wretched song has been
the bane of my existence for years."

"Oh? Well perhaps I could rectify this situation," Grimhilde smirked as she made a swiping motion through the air with her hand.

The Cruella De Vil song sputtered and flickered in and out until it went completely by the wayside. In its place, a different song came on the sound system...

_It's a world of laughter, a world of tears. It's a world of hopes and a world of fears. There's so much that we share, That it's time we're aware It's a small world after all._

An inaudible groan could practically be felt throughout the restaurant.

"Darling, this isn't better," Cruella growled.

"I'm well aware," Grimhilde's smirk cracked into an evil grin. "I've just hexed their sound system to only play this song on an unstoppable endless loop. I thought I might try... having fun even as the queen."

Cruella's grin quickly matched Grimhilde's. "Then let's take this party to the car and watch the fireworks."

With two pairs of binoculars and a good vantage point from their parking spot, Cruella and Grimhilde watched as Mr. Cluck's Chicken Shack's patrons vacated the restaurant to evade the eternally repeating song. Cruella doubted the patrons would have moved any faster even if someone had pulled the fired alarm.

"That was certainly the fastest I have ever seen a restaurant cleared out," Cruella chuckled. "You are quite the little witch, Grimmie."

"One of my many talents," Grimhilde boasted.

"Powerful and the Fairest One of All," Cruella remarked. "You truly have it all!"

Grimhilde's laughter died down and her face went somber. "If only that _were_ true. But... that wretched Snow White is still the Fairest One of All."

"According to who?" Cruella asked. "A disembodied head floating behind glass? Have you noticed he doesn't even have eyes? After all, I'd hardly call a prepubescent girl with a shrill voice and a flat chest the fairest in any capacity. His judgment clearly cannot be trusted. No, when I think of the Fairest One of All, I imagine a woman more experienced, a woman with graceful curves and a simply flawless complexion, a woman who carries herself with regality and power. Darling, face it, you knock the competition out of the park!"

Grimhilde turned to face Cruella and saw that Cruella looked absolutely serious. Cruella rarely complimented anyone but herself. That meant something special. Maybe it was enough to be Cruella's Fairest One of All. Reading Cruella's cues and following the wiles of her own heart, Grimhilde leaned her face in to meet Cruella's. Her companion, however, was far less subtle and plunged in. The ruby red lips of the two women came together in a long overdue embrace. Though the flavor of cigarettes was heavy on Cruella's breath, somehow that just made the kiss all the more enticing for Grimhilde. It was the flavor of Cruella, a flavor she long desired to taste for herself. As they pulled away, they two women did not break eye contact. Neither wanted to turn away from this.

Cruella laughed, prompting Grimhilde to laugh as well. "Well that was about damn time."
Maleficent had a seat at the head of a table that seated seven in a modest room with a large window looking out at the Overtaken Kingdom. Back when the castle belonged to Xehanort, this particular chamber had been nothing more than a breakfast nook. However, its intimacy reminded Maleficent of the conference room back in the Underworld mansion that had long since been lost to them. Maleficent decided that this would be a more appropriate setting for this meeting than the throne room.

"To me, my Overtakers," Maleficent bade.

And one by one, the original six Overtakers entered the chamber: Hades, Ursula, Loki, Doctor Doom, Russell Edgington, and Fish Mooney. After all that they'd been through, it was the founding members that Maleficent trusted the most.

"My original Overtakers," Maleficent began. "I fear that I have been untruthful with you. As I'm sure many of you have already surmised, I had no contingency plan in the event the Book of Prophecies failed, and after the Master took over, I thought our cause lost. Now that we require a new direction, I have none to offer. However, it was brought to my attention that the Overtakers have always been about more than just my leadership. Our victories are owed to the power we wield when our talents are combined. Therefore, I thought together we might decide our new plan."

"About time you started letting us in," Ursula said. "I was starting to worry you'd keep faking it for months to come."

"Indeed," Loki agreed. "I'm quite pleased to be back in the loop, though I do hope that this loop does not become my noose."

"Oh stop being Mister Melodrama and admit ya like us," Hades said. "C'mon, it won't kill ya. I would know."

"Well first of all," Russell chimed in. "We've got Marluxia and the other old Norts who've agreed to a temporary alliance to take down Xigbar, who's apparently in cahoots with Cronus. Whatever we do, it'll have to take all that madness into account."

"Morgan le Fay remains a threat," Doom added. "She and I met on the field of battle when I attempted to reclaim Latveria. Her grudge against me has not wavered."

Loki let out a loud scoff at that.

"I believe," Doom continued, "that she may also be allied with Cronus. Her mystical mastery of time is far beyond that which she has displayed before."

"Time... time, why is that ringin' a bell with dear ol' daddy?" Hades pondered aloud. "Wait. Oh no. Oy. Yep, that's gonna be it."

"You wanna let the rest of us in on this?" Fish asked as she raised a single eyebrow.

"I know what daddy-o is plannin'," Hades said. "See, back when he ruled the universe, he made three powerful gems to shape time and space and all of that booga-booga."

"Like the Infinity Gems," Loki remarked.

"Exactamundo," Hades replied. "Well, once Zeusy took dad down, Zeus sent the gems to get lost into an alternate future ruled by a demon named Aku. Nasty guy. Don't go there. But that timeline got undone, and the gems boomeranged right back to Zeus, so he scattered them across multiple worlds, protected within the big three elements."
"But there are four core elements," Doom corrected.

"Technically, yes, but no," Hades said. "See Cronus had three sons: Bolt Boy, my other brother Poseidon, and yours truly. Lord of Air, Lord of Water, and Lord of Fire." Hades stroked his flaming hair to punctuate his meaning. "Earth was the neutral ground for us, so not the best place to hide a stone that can rewrite reality. If Cronus wants them back, we're gonna need to make sure that dad does NOT get his grubby little mitts on those gems, or it's game over for us. Capiche?"

"Are the gems only able to be used by Cronus himself?" Maleficent asked, her interest piqued.

"Naw anybody with powerful enough magic can-," but Hades stopped short and grinned once he caught on. "Oh-ho-HO! I see what you're gettin' at! We snag the gems first, Cronus's master plan goes down the master can, and then we used the gems to rewrite reality to be whatever we want!"

"Sounds like a tantalizin' treat!" Russell said with a laugh. "I'm all in!"

"So where exactly are the gems?" Fish asked.

"That... I don't know," Hades admitted.

"No matter," Maleficent said. "If they are out there, we will find them."

"And we've got a leg up on Cronus," Hades said. "Because, here's the thing, I may not know where the gems are, but they'll be locked up tight so that only the corresponding godly element or another gem can get access to the prize. And you've got me to get ya into the fire one."

"Unfortunately there's a bit of a snafu," Ursula said. "Even if we do manage to get our hands on the gems, Sora and the other heroes will try to stop us. Our current record against them isn't exactly one to inspire confidence."

"We're going to have to take down the heroes before we rewrite reality this time," Fish added.

"I believe that chore was delegated those who attended Cinderella's ball," Doom said pointedly, earning a frustrated growl from Ursula. "Clearly direct confrontation with the heroes is ill advised."

Russell held his hand out in front of him and allowed a bright beam of fairy light to radiate off his palms.

"Maybe there's some way to extinguish the light altogether," Russell remarked as he closed his fist, vanishing his own light to illustrate his point. "If we take away their power and their hope, we take away their ability to fight back."

"Many dark sorcerers have pondered that very possibility," Maleficent said. "Ansem, Xehanort's Heartless, sought that very thing. However, even his well researched report had no answers to that riddle."

"Ah, but, as you said, many dark sorcerers have pondered that question," Loki chimed in. "In my travels, I encountered a powerful magic tree grown from an acorn of Yggdrasil. It was a beacon of light and other most unpleasantly cheerful things, until a powerful sorcerer named Zhan Tiri made it more interesting. He corrupted the tree and used it as a stronghold to spread his darkness across his world. He knew much about the nature of light and darkness; if anyone uncovered the secret to extinguishing the light, it was Zhan Tiri."

"And where can we find him?" Doom asked.
"Zhan Tiri was banished from the living plain long ago," Loki answered. "And even if we could set him free, he wasn't exactly the cooperative sort. But the tree still stands. If there's anything Zhan Tiri left behind, it would be there."

"We do not yet know the location of the gems," Maleficent said, "but I presume the tree will be simple enough for us to visit. We shall go there first. For now, let us keep this between the seven of us in this room. The others will be told when we know more."

"Translation: you don't trust Imperious, Jafar, or Ardyn not to stab you in the back yet," Russell said.

"Or Amora," Doom offered.

This earned confused looks from the others.

"She rescued me from Morgan le Fay in exchange for admission to the Overtakers," Doom explained. "I granted her request tentatively."

"Were you going to tell the rest of us, babe?" Hades asked.

"It matters not," Maleficent said. "We can keep the rest of the Overtakers occupied following Cronus and his minions. Perhaps they may lead us to the location of one of the gems."

"Ha HA! The Overtakers are truly back in business!" Ursula declared. "Oh, this feels right, doesn't it?"

Maleficent couldn't help but smile at that. "Indeed it does."

Chapter End Notes

The story of the Gems of Cronus is borrowed from/inspired by the Samurai Jack episode "Jack and the Swamp Monster." However, that's pretty much the only thing from that show that I'm using. The locations of the gems are going to be fully unique to this fic.

Zhan Tiri is a villain from Tangled: the Animated Series, and his tree is featured prominently in the episode "Rapunzel and the Great Tree." More about that to come next time.
The Tree of Zhan Tiri

Chapter Notes

This chapter runs concurrently with the Tangled: the Animated Series episode "Rapunzel and the Great Tree." All new settings and new characters depicted in this chapter are from that show and that episode.

Maleficent, Hades, Ursula, Loki, Doom, Russell, and Fish stepped out of the Corridor of Darkness onto the ridge overlooking the tree of Zhan Tiri. Located far from the Kingdom of Corona, this massive tree once housed the most powerful dark sorcerer to ever threaten the kingdom blessed by the fabled sun drop. It's trunk was bigger around than a castle, and its branches reached for the sky and tickled the clouds.

"Extraordinary," Maleficent remarked.

"A botanical marvel," Doom agreed.

"Really makes you feel humble," Fish added.

A pause.

"It's... a tree," Hades said.

"An offspring of Yggdrasil," Loki explained. "Its progenitor is far greater in scope than even this. But enough gawking. Come. Zhan Tiri's lair was inside the tree."

"Shh, hang on," Russell interrupted, his advanced hearing and sense of smell picking up something. "We've got company. Sounds like three large animals travelling alongside each other. I wanna say two bears, and then third is... somethin' else. An elephant? No, too small. Maybe a rhino? Well, whatever it is, it's in pursuit of a wagon."

"Runaways from a travelling circus? HA!" Ursula suggested.

"So the zoo is on the way, big whoop," Hades said. "We've got a tree to investigate and a cosmos to conquer. Eyes on the prize."

"I concur," Maleficent said. "The problems of this world are of little concern. If they interfere in our affairs, we will deal with them as necessary."

And so the group proceeded forward on the path to the base of the tree.

"So I take it your relationship with your father is no better than your relationship to your brother or nephew?" Loki asked as he walked alongside Hades.

"This might be the one and ONLY time I say that Zeus is the LESSER pain in my flame," Hades answered. "I hate Bolt Boy and his klutzy brat of a kid, don't get me wrong, but at least they never swallowed me whole. Oh yeah, right down the hatch as lil' bitty baby. I spent the better part of my adolescence in Cronus's stomach. Sound like fun? No it isn't."
"Fathers are rarely all that they should be," Loki remarked. "I had two men who should have been fathers to me, and neither one ever cared to play that role. One slapped me about like a slab of meat and abandoned me on a frozen rock. The other raised me as second rate son, ever in the shade of Thor's greatness and ever seen as a monster that would never truly be accepted. Thor may be my most hated adversary, but Laufey and Odin dealt me wounds that cut far deeper."

"Geez louise, you and I sure got the not-so-lucky draw for families," Hades said. "But, I mean, hey, there's something to be said for a found family."

"Found family?" Loki asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

"The way I see it, you're more like the brother I always wanted than the one I got stuck with," Hades said. "I've got my girl; you've got your guy. Then there's our sassy lesbian auntsie and wacky Uncle Russell around for the ride."

"I heard that," Russell chimed in.

"Point is, Lokes, what we've got right here is everything our disappointing families never were," Hades said. "A family that conquers the world together and all that booga-booga."

Loki smirked. "How charmingly sentimental. Shall we hug and braid friendship bracelets now too?"

"Yeah, yeah, laugh all ya want, but you know it's true," Hades said. "Point is, with you guys by my side, I'm confident we can kick daddy-o's dead-beat keister back to Tartarus where it belongs."

As the Overtakers crossed the threshold into the Great Tree proper, most were expecting something resembling a hollowed out tree awaiting them on the other side. The truth was far more breathtaking. Inside the Great Tree were cliffs dropping off into pitch black chasms, lush greenery growing wildly in every direction, roaring waterfalls, and a steep pathway spiraling steadily upwards and then down again. The tree's interior was a whole new world in and of itself.

"It's been centuries since I've seen nature so raw and untainted," Russell remarked. "You wouldn't see shit like this back in my home world."

"Not exactly the cover of Better Homes and Hesperides magazine, but its got potential," Hades remarked.

"The dark magic here feels... stifled," Maleficent remarked. "I can sense it, but the powers are dormant."

Doom peered over the ledge into the chasm. "There's something powerful down there. It is dormant, but, like a volcano, it could erupt once more with the proper conditions. Perhaps I could wield the magic for myself, if I only-"

"Let's not accidentally awaken Zhan Tiri if we can help it," Loki interrupted. "I'd hate to have to endure a second coming of Master Octomus."

"You give me far too little credit," Doom said. "I've never unleashed unforeseen catastrophes in my pursuit of power."

"Yes, and I'm Marie of Romania," Russell interjected, earning a venomous glare from Doom.

"Controlling power is what we all do best," Maleficent pointed out. "I must admit myself intrigued by the state of this tree's power as well. However, we have more pressing matters with which to attend. We should first see what Zhan Tiri may have left behind. Perhaps there is some clue to better
wielding the dark powers."

"No where else to go but up," Fish remarked, looking up at the spiral pathway and glancing back regretfully at her shoes (which were not at all appropriate for such a hike).

"All the way up there? Do you have any idea how tough inclines are when you're slithering on tentacles?" Ursula asked, also dreading the hike.

"No problemo," Hades chimed in.

Hades snapped his fingers and an all black chariot hitched to an obsidian dragon-like demon materialized in front of them. Hades hopped into the chariot and took the reigns.

"All aboard the Hades express," Hades called out. "Well, y'know, not actually all aboard since only two passengers are gonna fit, but, hey, you get the drift."

Fish and Ursula piled into the chariot alongside Hades, and Maleficent transformed herself into a green orb of energy, leaving Loki, Doom, and Russell to walk. Maleficent hovered over the walking path as she led the procession, for once being conscious of the other Overtakers on foot. Though a steep trek with a far drop down, the path was wide and adorned with various breeds of wild flowers. The sight of such vibrantly colored petals caused Fish's mind to drift back to Radiant Garden.

"So it turns out that punk Daken sniped control of crime in Radiant Garden out from under me," Fish said to her chariot companions. "I had Ratigan securely in my pocket, but Daken got him arrested and strong armed the underbosses into following him now."

"Who does that little worm think he is?" Ursula growled. "It was the two of us and Steve who put in all that work to control every corner of the city."

"That's the odd thing," Fish said. "I keep going over it in my head. Steve was the one who vouched for Daken even though Steve knew that I had my eye on taking over Ratigan's turf. And then for Steve to bring in a third crime boss to install as prime minister? He cut me out of the game entirely. Why would he betray me like that?"

"Maybe he's racist," Hades suggested with a shrug.

"Believe me, I considered that," Fish said. "But I think it's something else."

"You know what I think?" Ursula asked. "I think Steve's consolidating his own power, and he cut us out because we can't be so easily tamed. He might look like an innocent moron, but he's shrewd and dangerous."

Fish scowled. "That seems to be a reoccurring narrative. I need to stop underestimating gay white boys who seem harmless."

"What? Can't you just order him out?" Hades asked. "A little touchy-touchy toxin-muchy and then, badda boom, it's all yours."

"Steve's already won the hearts and minds of Radiant Garden," Fish said with a shake of her head. "Taking control away from him now that he's cut me out is going to be a difficult task that may be more trouble than it's worth. All the same, I don't tolerate blatant betrayal or just letting it slide."

"Then we play a bigger game," Ursula suggested. "Let him have Radiant Garden. You always talked about a criminal empire spreading through multiple worlds. Set one up that Steve would have no choice but to join up with, and then put a leash on him as one of your underbosses."
"Hmm, the idea has merit," Fish said. "I'd have to find a way to choke his inter-world commerce. It'd be doable with the proper resources. But building a criminal foothold on multiple worlds is going to take time, and I'm back on square one."

"We'll get creative, angelfish," Ursula said. "I'm sure we can expedite the process."

"Perhaps it's time to go back to Gotham after all," Fish suggested. "After all, I've got an umbrella boy to reclaim."

Several paces back, Doom, Russell, and Loki were engaged in their own conversation.

"So Morgan le Fay's back again?" Russell asked. "Should've known. You can't keep a cunt like that down."

"Have a care," Doom warned. "Morgan may be our enemy, but she is a shrewd and talented sorceress worthy of respect. She is not, as you so eloquently put it, a cunt."

"I think the mention of cunts reminds him of his little tryst with her," Loki whispered to Russell, prompting a chuckle from the vampire.

"You both lack maturity despite your immortality," Doom said with a scoff.

"Oh, come on, you're the one who engaged in salacious activities with the enemy," Russell said. "If you're gonna fuck her, at least don't act ashamed about it. Own it."

"Doom is ashamed of nothing," he growled. "At any rate, whether or not she and I had engaged in sexual acts, defeating her now is no matter to take lightly."

"True enough," Loki said with a shrug. "Do you suppose she's still in league with Mephisto in addition to Cronus?"

"I fear it may be likely," Doom answered.

"You ever notice how all of our reoccurring non-hero problems are either your fault or Hades's?" Russell asked. "From Hades we got Hecate and Cronus, and from you, Doom, we got your ex-girlfriend and the demon who kidnapped your mommy. That's to say nothin' of Baron Mordo or Ultron."

"Victor makes friends wherever he goes," Loki teased.

"Enemies are born of successes and those who were defeated along the way," Doom stated. "That is why you have no enemies in pursuit of you, currently. How could you when you have no successes to your name?"

"Or maybe I'm just better than y'all at burying bodies permanently," Russell suggested.

When the path came to a fork in the road leading down two tunnels, Maleficent hovered back and forth thoughtfully before choosing the right path. The Overtakers proceeded through a passageway lined with suits of armor brandishing various types of pollaxes. The suits of armor had obviously seen better days, but it did strike Maleficent as strange that Zhan Tiri would have so many suits of armor to begin with.

"Sheesh, he's got more armor than Doomy here," Hades remarked.

"Crude armor," Doom corrected. "Doom would never tolerate such poor craftsmanship as this."
The passageway emptied out into a large circular room with walls decorated with hieroglyphics and a large pond in the center of the area. A shelf filled with scrolls was carved into the far wall, and many of the scrolls had spilled onto the grassy floor. Maleficent's green wisp expanded into a large blaze that returned her to humanoid form.

"If Zhan Tiri left anything behind, it would be housed here," Maleficent said as she picked up one of the scrolls.

"How wonderful, these scrolls are written in incoherent scribbles," Fish said as she glanced over the page.

"Not scribbles, ancient runes," Loki corrected as he admired a section of the wall with a sun and moon with drops coming down from them.

"Can you read it?" Maleficent asked.

"Aye, that I can," Loki said. "I can read and speak all languages. It's a gift possessed by all Asgardians."

"Then how do you have it since you're not Asgardian?" Russell asked, giving Loki a playful nudge.

Loki shot Russell a venomous glare but did not dignify him with a response.

"There's quite a lot here, and not all of it is particularly clear," Loki said. "But the short of it is that a drop of sunlight landed on this world and grew into a magical flower with the power to heal, whilst a drop of moonlight fell and grew into a stone with devastating consequences."

"Hey, trust me, I've been up close and personal with Apollo and Artemis," Hades said. "There's no way in Tartarus that something like that just fell from the sun or the moon."

"A fairytale," Maleficent said, "but perhaps one with a shadow of truth if Zhan Tiri gave it such consideration."

"It could be that the sun and moon were merely this world's primitive way of identifying forces beyond their comprehension," Doom suggested.

"A fair assessment," Loki agreed. "From what I can gather from these runes, a distilled drop of light and darkness are far more likely. Perhaps they fell to this world when the first Princesses of Heart restored the worlds from the dark cataclysm of the Keyblade War?"

"Sounds like the type of boring question Xehanort would've asked," Russell groaned. "How is any of this supposed to help us?"

"Oh, wait a splash, I've got something here," Ursula said as she unwrapped another scroll. "Someone translated part of this one. Looks like an incantation for the light. Flower, gleam and glow. Let your power shine. Make the clock reverse. Bring back what once was mine. Heal what has been hurt. Change the Fates' design. Save what has been lost. Bring back what once was mine, what once was mine."

"Sounds like a really powerful healing spell," Hades remarked. "Could even be used for youth in the right hands."

"We may have to go find this sun drop," Ursula said. "I've been starting to notice a few wrinkles that I could do without."
"Oh please, you're gorgeous and you know it," Fish said, as she looked over another scroll.

"A healin' spell ain't exactly what we're lookin' for," Russell said. "I thought this Zhan Tiri fucker was a powerful dark sorcerer. So where's the dark incantation?"

"Actually, it's right here," Fish said, waving her scroll around. "At least, I think this is an incantation. It has the same rhyme pattern as the healing one."

"Let me see that," Maleficent requested, plucking the scroll from Fish's hands. "Wither and decay. End this destiny. Break these earthly chains, and set the spirit free."

"Oof, chills babe, givin' me chills," Hades said. "All this talk about decaying and ending destinies is very HOT, and, trust me, I know hot."

"First of all, Hades, you repulse me," Doom said. "Secondly, the spell certainly piques my curiosity. Is it a spell merely for death or one for the spread of darkness? And what conduit is necessary to activate such a power?"

"To your second question, this moonstone seems the likely answer," Loki said. "As to your first, we may need a demonstration to know fully."

"And where is this moonstone?" Russell asked.

"Allegedly in a place known only as the Dark Kingdom," Loki answered.

"There's a place called the Dark Kingdom, and we haven't tried to take it over, why?" Russell said with a chuckle.

"The darkness of this incantation is powerful," Maleficent remarked. "No matter the intended purpose, I believe we may be able to use it to our advantage."

"So set course for the Dark Kingdom?" Ursula asked. "Grab the moonstone and get to work?"

"Patience my dear," Maleficent said. "We should look around here for a while longer. After all, Zhan Tiri's powers were indeed great. Perhaps he-"

"Shh, somebody's comin'," Russell interrupted. "Smells like a party of plucky youths. Probably the ones being chased by the circus earlier. No doubt they're hero types."

"All of us together should be able to make quick work of these heroes," Doom said, readying himself for a fight.

"No," Maleficent said. "We know nothing of these intruders. If they know of the tree and Zhan Tiri's powers, they may be of some use to us. Let's keep an eye on them from a safe distance."

Ursula snapped her fingers, and Flotsam and Jetsam materialized, floating next to the Sea Witch.

"You know what to do, boys," Ursula instructed.

The two eels nodded and tucked themselves away in a crevice to observe. Maleficent opened a Corridor of Darkness that she and her allies proceeded through, depositing them in another chamber of the tree. Ursula blew a kiss to the open air, and when she did, she blew a large bubble that floated in a single spot so that all of the Overtakers could see it.

"Now we can keep our eyes," Ursula began, "or, rather, our eels on them."
The bubble quickly took on the image of the previous chamber, just as the party of intruders entered. Leading them was a girl with a long blonde braid that reached almost to the ground and had a width that suggested that her hair was actually a great deal longer. Though none of the Overtakers knew it, her name was Rapunzel, and she was being accompanied by her companions Adira, Cassandra, Hook-Foot, Shorty, and the horse Fidella.

"Oy, yep, plucky little heroes for sure," Hades said. "Why do they always look like that?"

The Overtakers watched as Rapunzel and her friends looked over the hieroglyphics and various scrolls, discovering the translated healing incantation that they seemed to already be aware of.

"This is boring," Russell complained. "They're obviously not gonna be useful. Let's just kill them, grab the spell, and go."

But just as Russell started to complain, Rapunzel stumbled upon the dark incantation. Maleficent hushed her companions and watched the scene unfold carefully.

"The sun drop's power was to heal," Cassandra said. "What's the moonstone's?"

Rapunzel walked over to the edge of pool and began to read the spell. "Wither and decay. End this destiny. Break these earthly chains, and set the spirit free."

Rapunzel looked around as nothing happened and even examined a strand of her own hair. For a moment, Maleficent feared that Russell was indeed correct. However, Rapunzel began to repeat the incantation, and, as she did, the lush grass and vegetation around her began to turn a dark shade of black.

"Uh, Raps," Cassandra said as she began to notice the changes, but Rapunzel didn't seem to hear. In fact, Rapunzel seemed to be repeating the incantation over and over as if she was entranced by it. Maleficent and the other Overtakers watched this unfold, practically on the edge of their seats to see what would happen next. Rapunzel's eyes turned a deep ebony, eclipsing the whites of her eyes, and as they did, the darkness spread. Rapunzel's companions sunk to their knees, coughing and in pain. The scene on the bubble began to grow fuzzy and dissolve, as Maleficent realized that the spell was effecting Flotsam and Jetsam as well.

"No! NO! KEEP THE IMAGE!" Maleficent ordered.

The eels powered through their pain and obeyed.

"Okay Raps, you can stop now," Cassandra coughed out. "Rapunzel!"

But Rapunzel did not hear. Her chanting had now morphed into singing as she dropped the scroll, no longer needing it.

"Wither and decay."

The princess's long golden hair had started to take on a different hue. The tips of her hair were turning as black as her eyes.

"End this destiny."

The braids binding her hair dissolved, and her now fully black hair came fully undone, showing its great length and spreading out like poisonous serpents waiting for a chance to strike. Even Maleficent had to admit that the sight was darker than she'd anticipated.
"Break these earthly chains, and set the spirit free. The spirit free."

The darkness and death radiated from Rapunzel's hair, wielding the full power of Zhan Tiri's spell. It was only thanks to Adira's quick action, knocking Rapunzel into the pool and breaking her concentration that the darkness was subdued. Rapunzel's hair turned back to its natural blonde color and the dark effect on her friends ended.

"I think we've seen enough," Maleficent said. "The girl's power is exactly what we need to extinguish the light once and for all."

"You saw what it did to that girl's friends as well as Flotsam and Jetsam," Fish argued. "She'll do the same thing to us. It's too dangerous to control."

"With the power of Cronus's Gems, it should not be anything we cannot handle," Maleficent argued. "The gems will keep us safe."

Maleficent summoned up a Corridor of Darkness back to the Eminence Palace. "Come. Our work here is finished. We have what we need."

"Uh, Malef, babe, shouldn't we, y'know, grab the girl?" Hades asked.

Maleficent shook her head. "We are not yet ready to extinguish the light, and I do not yet wish to betray our intentions to our enemies. Flotsam and Jetsam will keep an eye on the girl. We know where to find her when we have need of her. For now, the gems should be our primary concern."

None could argue with that. The Overtakers proceeded through Maleficent's portal until only Maleficent herself was left behind.

"Very soon," Maleficent said to herself. "We shall break the chains of light, and set all spirits free. Darkness will prevail."
Ever since he lost the powers of the Dark One, Rumplestiltskin had meticulously cultivated a new conduit to hold his magical powers. Beneath an enchanted spell jar, Rumplestiltskin grew a mystical rose to bloom with his magical power and grant him a source to draw from. Should the spell jar even be destroyed, his power would be lost forever. And now Rumple was staring at the spell jar being held in the foul clutches of Captain Hook in one hand, whilst Belle was restrained at hook-point in the other. Hook had his back to the town line, ready to push both beyond the point of no return if Rumple tried anything sneaky.

"Time for you to make your choice, crocodile," Hook said with a devilish grin. "Which do you love more? Your power or your wench? I'll return one of them to you unharmed, but other... well, it won't exactly be a very pleasant denouement."

Of course, Hook had no intentions of honoring his word. No matter what, the spell jar would be shattered, Belle's throat would be slit, and then Rumple himself would meet a karmic death after losing everything. However, making Rumple choose was all part of the game. Hook knew Rumple would never choose Belle over his power, and forcing him to break Belle's heart before she died was just too delicious to pass up. She'd die as horribly as Milah had. That would be true justice.

"Let Belle go," Rumple said. "Keep the rose. Just give me back my wife!"

Hook hadn't expected that answer. He'd obviously misjudged the former Dark One, though it still wouldn't change anything. However, that momentary shock and confusion at Rumple's answer proved a grave mistake. Belle slammed her elbow into Hook's gut, kicked him in the groin, and snatched the spell jar out of his hand. As Hook doubled over in pain, Belle ran back to Rumple's side and returned the spell jar to him. A fireball appeared in Rumple's hand as he grinned a crooked smile at his adversary.

"Now I'm finally going to do what I should have done years ago," Rumple said through gritted teeth.

"Rumple, NO!" Belle said, prompting the former Dark One to dismiss his fireball begrudgingly.

Something else caught Rumple's attention in the corner of his eye, a tiny little lizard. He smirked at the idea that struck him almost immediately.

"You called me a crocodile, yes?" Rumple asked as he waved his hand over the tiny lizard.

The lizard instantly began to grow and morph. Hook's eyes widened as the tiny lizard became the largest crocodile Hook had ever seen. The beast hissed at Hook and lunged for him, causing Hook to stumble backwards, away from the croc.

"You come after me or my wife ever again," Rumple threatened. "You ever even return to Storybrooke, and you will learn, fatally, that you never should have smiled at this crocodile."

The croc lunged for Hook, and he dove away for safety... right over the town line.

Hook cursed angrily as Storybrooke and his hated rival disappeared before his eyes. He could feel the difference in air as he entered a land without magic. He tried in vain to open a Corridor of Darkness back to the Eminence Palace, but he could not muster it. Hook pulled out his phone and
attempted to call Jafar. However, he was met solely with a strange sort of static.

"Why the Hell should I carry this bloody thing if it never works?" Hook asked angrily.

Hook could practically see Rumple's taunting smirk from the other side of the barrier, enjoying his misfortune. He stuffed the phone back into his satchel and grinned when he saw what else was still resting inside. The genie's lamp from Tamatoa glistened in the sunset's light as Hook removed it. Hook had intended to save the lamp to give to Jafar after he apologized, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Hook rubbed the lamp...

…And nothing happened. The Land Without Magic blocked even the genie's powers from being unleashed. Hook sighed and proceeded down the street towards the next town over. He'd wait out his time there until the Overtakers came to rescue him. And if they never did... well, Hook didn't really care to indulge that hypothetical. The sun had already set, and the sky was turning blacker by the minute. The lonely road and the forest around it were already shrouded by darkness. Normally, Hook didn't fear the darkness. He'd been below deck on enough ships to be used to walking around with limited visibility, and his other senses were sharp enough to compensate. However, after being the Master's prisoner for a month, the shadows had new reasons to make Hook uncomfortable.

When a rustle in the woods caught Hook's attention, he wrote off the jolt of fear as mere paranoia. It was almost certainly just the wind or an opossum out on an evening hunt. Even still, Hook couldn't shake the image of Rumplestiltskin's crocodile from his mind. When a second and third rustle sounded even closer to the pirate, he stopped in his tracks and shined the flashlight of his phone into the woods where he heard the noise.

"If anyone's there, show yourself now or get the bloody hell away from me," Hook shouted. "I'm not a man you wish to trifle with."

No response came. Hook sighed and put away the phone. It was all just paranoia. Useless, mundane paranoia. And he called himself an Overtaker. Hook proceeded along the road, taking longer strides. He told himself that he was only doing it to get to the next town quicker, but he knew in his heart that was a lie. Another rustle came from the woods, accompanied this time by the sound of a heavy branch cracking. Hook halted his progress and drew his sword, pointing it threateningly at the woods.

"Have you a taste for cold steel?" Hook shouted at the woods.

Still, no response came. Hook stood still for a moment, staring into the woods with his sword drawn, ready to slice through whatever night stalker or predatory animal had their sights set on him. He was briefly startled by the sound of his phone buzzing, but that feeling quickly turned to relief. The other Overtakers must be looking for him. He must've finally gotten a signal. Hook sheathed his sword to free up his hand for his phone. However, when he looked at the message, he didn't recognize the number, and the message caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand up:

*Look behind you.*

Hook took a deep breath after reading the message. If there was one thing Hook refused to do, it was to die frightened without a fight. Hook tucked the phone back into the satchel and let his hand slowly drift to his sword. Then with one swift motion, Hook whirled around, swinging his sword. The blade clanged harmlessly off of a metal surface, and Hook could feel the vibration of the sword in his teeth. Hook turned his eyes on his unwanted guest.

All that was visible against the blackness was a glowing red jack-o-lantern-like face.
Blackheart gave a light shove to the titan that was suspended upside down from the ceiling, causing him to swing back and forth.

"I hope you're enjoying your new view on the world," Blackheart said. "I take it you've had some time to think about my offer, Iapetus."

"I am a titan!" Iapetus roared. "And you are naught by a simple demon. An ANT to me!"

"An ant that managed to capture you," Blackheart reminded him. "And an ant who trained in the arts of torture under Mephisto himself. So I'll give you one last chance: tell me everything you know about Cronus, or I'll inflict such a reckoning that it'll make you long for something as merciful as Tartarus!"

"I haven't even seen Cronus since the Golden Age!" Iapetus growled. "I was enjoying a nice spa resort weekend once I escaped from Tartarus. Cronus went crazy back in the day. I'd have to be crazy to throw my lot back in with him!"

Blackheart leaned in close to Iapetus's face. "I don't believe you."

"Blackheart!" Jafar hissed as he strolled into the chamber. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I caught a titan," Blackheart boasted. "And I'm about to make him tell me all about Cronus's schemes."

"How did you... oh never mind," Jafar said. "Have you seen Hook? I noticed the Storybrooke contingent all returned, but I've yet to find him."

"Huh... nope, haven't seen him," Blackheart replied with a shrug. "I don't even think I saw him return with the others. Maybe he died?"

"Do not even jest," Jafar said. "If you see him, tell him I require his presence at once... I fear I acted... improperly during our last encounter."

Blackheart grinned devilishly. "I'll let him know that you're absolutely sick with regret."

"Don't do me any favors," Jafar said with a roll of his eyes as he took his leave.

"Now then, where were we?" Blackheart asked as he turned back to Iapetus. "I believe you were just about to tell me what Cronus is planning."

Iapetus growled. "I. WAS AT. A SPA!"

The title credits of the most watched television talk show in Radiant Garden flashed onto the screen: *What's New With Newlin?* A catchy little ditty played as the camera panned over to Steve Newlin sitting in a well lit studio room with a comfortable chair and two decorative ferns. Steve, as ever, had a big grin on his face as the producer's voice introduced him.

"Good afternoon Radiant Garden, and thank you for tuning in!" Steve said. "This is *What's New With Newlin?* where you get the hard hitting journalism that you deserve to keep our city healthy and prosperous. Today, I'm proud to announce that we have finally done it! Thanks to the efforts of all of y'all back home in holding the Restoration Committee accountable, they have finally agreed to hold public elections for Prime Minister. Our voices will be heard in the coming election.

"The Restoration Committee has already announced that Ansem the Wise's former ward and the
Restoration Committee's chief scientist, Ienzo, will be their candidate for the position. Now I respect Ienzo a great deal, and he's a true patriot who has dedicated himself to this fine city. However, we should not overlook that Ienzo was a founding member of the terrorist cell Organization XIII, who were responsible for that horrific Heartless Invasion two years ago. Not to mention, of course, that he is the old way of thinking. He's Ansem all over again in his policies, and he's just another puppet of the Restoration Committee and the Scrooge McDuck business interests. So stay woke, folks!

"Here to talk more about the issue is local real estate broker, chief of the affordable housing project, and my dear person friend, Mr. Wilson Fisk."

The camera panned out to reveal Kingpin sitting in an identical chair next to Steve Newlin. Kingpin smiled and waved at the camera.

"Thank you, Mr. Newlin, for the courtesy of having me on your television program," Kingpin said.

"Happy to have ya here, Mr. Fisk!" Steve said. "So, as a local businessman, what do you make of all this madness?"

"Well, it is most troubling to say the least," Kingpin answered. "Ienzo is a bright and ambitious young man, but he's barely over twenty. I certainly remember myself at twenty, and I would not have been prepared for so heavy a burden. He is obviously simply a well-spoken puppet of the Restoration Committee's agenda."

"And what do you make of the Restoration Committee?" Steve asked. "Because I've talked about their flaws a lot on my show, and some people think I'm way too hard on them."

"Any organization that serves on the public's behest should be kept under the highest scrutiny," Kingpin said. "The Restoration Committee has undoubtedly done great things for this city. No one denies their infrastructure work. Our city owes them immeasurable debt. However, a city requires more than just clean water, more than just houses, more than just well paved streets. It requires legislation, oversight, policing, sensible application of natural resources, and economic policy that is agreeable to both businesses and consumers. On this front, that have failed our city miserably."

"As I've said on this show again and again," Steve said. "Nobody questions the good they've done, but the bad needs to be discussed so that our city can be even better."

"Precisely. All sensible people know this to be true," Kingpin agreed. "Our new Prime Minister needs to be politically separate from the Restoration Committee to better keep their corruption and ineptitude in check."

"And I believe you have an announcement to make on that front?" Steve asked.

"Indeed I do," Kingpin said with a grin. "I, Wilson Fisk, publicly announce my candidacy for Prime Minister of Radiant Garden. I will be running on a platform that favors separation of powers, check and balances, and strong legislative measures to address growing concerns in the city."

"There ya have it, folks, you heard it here first," Steve Newlin said. "Wilson Fisk is running for Prime Minister. And I know he'll do an incredible job, which is why I'm going to go ahead and officially endorse his campaign. You want a better Radiant Garden? He's the man to do it!"

Fish Mooney turned off the television, and Steve and Kingpin vanished from the screen.

"Not bad," Fish remarked. "I almost believe him myself."

"They weren't kiddin' when they called him a master of media spin," Russell remarked with a
"chuckle. "He's always looked so dashing on TV."

"Yes, well, he moved forward quite a bit on mine and Ursula's plan whilst we were indisposed thanks to the Master," Fish said as she pulled up a chair next to Russell. "Can't say I'm exactly thrilled to have been cut out."

"Well, let's face it, you don't exactly carry the same... weight as Mr. Fisk does," Russell quipped with a smirk.

"I was never going to be Prime Minister," Fish said. "Politicians bore me. Nothing but a bunch of old racist white men who care more about their money than anything else. No, I was going to run the criminal underworld. Ursula was going to become Prime Minister under her Vance disguise."

"And look how well that turned out," Russell said. "Honestly, Fish, you expect me to side with you on that? Ursula failed miserably and exposed herself to the fuckin' heroes. Steve had to think quick for a new player to fill that void."

"Fair enough," Fish said with a shrug. "After all, I'm sure after Steve asked you and you refused, he figured he'd need to outsource."

"Well, he didn't ask me," Russell said, a twinge of uncertainty in his voice.

"Really?" Fish asked in mock surprise. "Even though you were the vampire king of Mississippi and his closest companion? He didn't even think to offer the position to you over a complete stranger?"

"I see what you're tryin' to do here, Fish," Russell said. "Stirrin' the pot isn't exactly subtle."

"But now do you see my point?" Fish asked. "He's scheming and solidifying his own power, all the while leaving those of us who got his ungrateful ass to the starting line in the dust with nothing."

"I trust Steve to know what he's doin'," Russell said as he got up from the chair and crossed the room.

"Do you? Or are you just saying that to spite me?" Fish asked.

"Don't. Test. Me," Russell warned through bared teeth as he left the room. Fish shrugged and poured herself a drink from the crystal decanter sitting on the table next to her. She knew she'd gotten through to Russell, whether or not he admitted it, and now, maybe she could throw some noise in Steve's direction.

Loki leaned over the edge of the Traverse Town Gizmo Shop roof down at Thor in the Second District below. Thor was busy entertaining the local refugee children by teaching them some ball game that Loki neither recognized nor cared to recognize. In Thor's boisterous conviviality towards the excited children, he failed to notice a single child, sitting off by himself looking rather lonesome. For Loki, that was all too familiar a sight.

"The heir of the Asgardian throne debases himself so," Loki sneered.

"Yet he has a certain charm, you must admit," Amora remarked.

"Your sycophantic admiration for him is ever exhausting, Enchantress," Loki sneered. "He's nothing more than a witless oaf, and you waste your affections pining for him."

"Better a witless oaf than a Frost Giant rat scurrying about as if he were a lion," Amora quipped.
"At least I've an excuse for why I'm unwanted rather than simply being an unpleasant harlot," Loki retorted.

"Enough of this, Loki," Amora sneered as a Corridor of Darkness opened. "We have company."

Doctor Doom strutted casually out onto the rooftop. "I thought I might find you here."

"Do not insult me by insinuating that I am predictable," Loki sneered. "I know you found me through your scanning technology."

"An insignificant detail," Doom replied.

"No detail is insignificant; you of all people should know this," Loki said before turning back to Thor. "Look at him, playing with his mortal pets."

"As engaging as watching Loki stew can be, I've better uses for my time," Amora said with a sigh as she vanished.

"You do not see me stalking Richards' every move," Doom remarked. "Your obsession is a distraction born of childish need. We've more pressing matters with which to attend."

"Why does he continue to subject himself to the ephemeral?" Loki remarked, ignoring Doom's words. "Whether this day or the next or a hundred years from now, they will die. It's nothing. A heartbeat. Whatever love they granted him will be snatched away by the vicissitudes of mortality. What is the use of so temporary a pleasure?"

Doom couldn't help but feel a pang of hurt at that sentiment, though he quickly brushed it aside as a feeling unworthy of himself. Doom saw himself as a god, as an all-powerful story never to end, yet his own mortality was all too real a fact, one Doom dreaded above all else. And despite their connection, if Doom's mortality was not rectified, he'd only be a brief moment in Loki's eternally long life.

"Perhaps there is value in that which is temporary," Doom suggested.

"Not enough," Loki said with a shake of his head.

Doom glared at his lover. There was no way that Loki had forgotten Doom's mortality. There was no way that Loki didn't realize what he was saying. The Liesmith chose every word with utmost care and precision. The subtext was clear: Loki was striving to understand Thor's love of mortals in order to somehow rationalize his affections and fondness for Doom. And he wanted Doom to know it. Being thought of in such a manner was insulting to Doom.

"Then by all means, continue to waste your time," Doom sneered. "Doom has precious little to spare."

Doom vanished into the darkness, leaving Loki alone to watch his brother.

"Geez Louise, you'd think a guy like Xehanort would've organized his library better," Hades said as he tossed aside another worthless book.

The library of the Eminence Palace, once the library of Xehanort, was a vast expanse of journals and books collected from many worlds. It was about the same size as the Hollow Bastion library, though this collection thankfully lacked moving bookshelves or mazes. Xehanort seemed to have been obsessed with collecting knowledge, and, while many of his books concerned powerful magic and
ancient wisdom, just as many were rudimentary history textbooks and academic papers on literature. Today, Maleficent had Hades, Ursula, Pete, and Pain and Panic helping her peruse the library. Unfortunately for the Overtakers, Xehanort didn't seem to have any system for sorting his books.

"Keep searching," Maleficent ordered. "There must be some book here that could be of use to our quest!"

"We found a book on potions to cure magical maladies," Panic said as he placed a large tome back on the shelf.

"But nothin' about Gems of Cronus or magical gems," Pain added.

"Ooh! We have a first edition Necronomicon!" Panic said with excitement.

Ursula snatched the dark grimoire from Panic's hands. "You're already insane enough without opening that book."

Pete growled and tossed a book over his shoulders. "Another book where we got doodly-squat."

"Be silent and read, you imbecile," Maleficent hissed.

"I'm just sayin' a shot in the dark ain't gonna get us any closer to-," But Pete stopped short when something caught his eye. "Huh?"

"What is it?" Maleficent asked with anticipation. "Have you found something? Show it to me at once, fool!"

"Yes sir-esy," Pete said with a chuckle as he lifted up a large dusty tome from the stack. "This here's a Book of Prophecies! Sure as my name is Pete! Ol' Xehanort must'a had one written up by the Author sometime."

Maleficent squinted in examination of the book. Sure enough, Pete was right. Yen Sid had mentioned that he and Xehanort used the Author's powers long ago. Yen Sid had offered to share the contents of his book with her to deter her from her schemes, but she'd refused. Now Xehanort's copy of the book was within her grasp. If anything possessed knowledge on the Gems of Cronus, this book was it. However, Yen Sid's warning rang in her ears.

"This book has been nothing but a great burden to both Xehanort and myself for as long as we have lived. Once read, it cannot be unread."

He'd wanted to protect her from the burden of knowing all predestination, and though Maleficent was confident in her success, she had no desire to be in any way deterred. There would be other ways to find the gems. There had to be.

"Leave it," Maleficent ordered, turning away from Pete.

"What? After all that readin'?" Pete asked, his face sinking.


As Pete grumbled about Maleficent's lack of appreciation for his find, Grimhilde entered the room, her cloak fluttering behind her dramatically.

"My attempts to peer into the mirror have yielded no results," Grimhilde said. "The gems cannot be found by the mirror's sight. Very few things exist that can hide from my magic. Are you quite certain
"Look, babe, just because your gaudy wall decoration couldn't find them doesn't mean they're not real," Hades said. "I saw my dad use them with my own two eyes back in the day. And, I mean, hey, my memory is top of the line. I don't forget things."

"Mmhm," Ursula said suspiciously "Where'd you leave your house keys?"

Hades went to reply but stopped short to think a second.

"Mind your own business," Hades said defensively.

"You are certain your mirror can see all throughout all the worlds?" Maleficent asked Grimhilde.

"Of course," Grimhilde answered. "No truth is safe from its sight."

"Then all is settled," Maleficent declared. "You cannot find the unfindable. The gems do not exist."

"WHAT?" Ursula asked.

"Babe, c'mon, trust me, they DO!" Hades said. "They're out there! We just gotta find 'em!"

"So this whole thing's been nothin' but a bust?" Pete asked.

Maleficent loudly tapped her staff on the stone floor to silence her companions.

"I mean the gems do not exist now!" Maleficent clarified.

"What-a-huh-now?" Pete asked.

"Grimhilde's mirror only sees what is, not what was or will be," Maleficent stated. "Zeus hid the Gems of Cronus in an alternate future once before, and Cronus has been cultivating a powerful time magic if Morgan le Fay is any indication. It is likely that the gems only exist within moments of time."

"Is that supposed to be a riddle?" Pete asked. "Just where we s'posed to be lookin'?"

"We must first discover when the gems will appear," Maleficent explained. "Then we begin our work to determine how best to reach them."

"Just like my brother to make things harder on everybody," Hades groaned. "So to figure out where the gems are hidden, we're gonna need a psychic who can see into the past and the future. I'll talk to the Fates, see if I can schmooze them into givin' me some pointers again."

"And I will consult the mirror for alternative options when they refuse to cooperate," Grimhilde said.


"No matter the hiding place, the gems will be revealed," Maleficent declared. "Then our real work begins."

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Hook regained consciousness to the familiar sight of the Underworld's Valley of the Dead, an inclined road leading up to Hades's former palace over the swirling green maelstrom of the River Styx. Hook was slung over the shoulders of his metallic captor as he stomped towards two men having a conversation outside of the palace. Hook wasn't facing the right direction to see them, but
he could pick up pieces of their conversation.

"The little twerp with the Keyblade is sitting right on top of it and he doesn't even know it," the first man said. "Morgan was asking if I could get in there stealthily, and I was like 'As if!' We're gonna have to show part of our hand to get it."

"Let's explore a few other options first," the second voice, a much deeper one, said. "I don't want my boys spoiling their big surprise any time soon. I want to be ready for a second Titanomachy before they are!"

"Maybe the Losertakers or the Sissy Society could lend us a hand keeping the kid distracted," the first man suggested. "Might be tough, but we could at least buy some time."

"Let's give it a shot," the second man agreed. "We can just- Ah! Ultron, didn't see ya there! Come on over! Don't be shy! Xiggy and I were just wrapping up."

The first man, "Xiggy," took the hint and warped away through a Corridor of Darkness to attend to whatever plan his boss was putting in motion. Hook's metal captor, apparently named Ultron, dumped the pirate at the feet of the second man. Hook glanced up to face the man who'd spoken. He was a white-bearded blue-skinned man whose very flesh reminded Hook of staring into the universe itself.

"Cronus," Hook said, intimidation dripping from his voice.

"Glad to see my reputation proceeds me," Cronus said with a deep chuckle. "Thanks for grabbin' him for me, Ultron. You're as efficient as a well oiled machine. HA! Well oiled machine! Get it? Oh, I'm nothin' if I'm not a kidder!"

"Most clever," Ultron replied in a deadpan monotone. "Now, if can we begin discussions about the godly metal to improve my-"

"Yes, yes, put it on my calendar," Cronus said. "We'll schmooze later. Right now, I can't be rude to my guest."

Ultron begrudgingly took his leave, leaving Hook alone with the titan king.

"So, Hooky-Dooky, glad to finally meet one of my Gloom-From-the-Tomb Son's little friends," Cronus said. "Y'know I've got a bit of a bone to pick. ... Well, bein' in the Underworld now, I guess I've got more than one. HA! But, you see, Hades went a little too far lately. Ya see, my baby brother Iapetus got kidnapped by a demon in league with your Overtakers. Haven't seen little Petty, that was my nickname for him, since the Golden Age, but he's still family. And there's nothin' more important than family."

"I had nothing to do with your brother's abduction," Hook said. "I assure you, on my honor, I never would have gone along with so grievous-"

Cronus held up a single hand to silence Hook.

"Hades goes too far abducting a titan," Cronus said. "So I had to retaliate by grabbin' one of his charges, and you, unfortunately, were the one who'd separated from the protection of the herd."

Cronus stretched out a beefy arm and fired a bolt of energy into the River Styx. In a billow of smoke, a soul emerged from the depths of the pit. At first, the figure appeared to be an animate shadow, but features soon began to fill in.
"I figured since you're gonna be stayin' here, you ought to have a familiar face around," Cronus said slyly.

Hook's eyes widened in horror when he saw who Cronus had summoned. "NO!"

The eternally youthful, yet smug and sinister face of a boy Hook thought to be long since dead emerged from the smoke.

"Pleasure to see you again, Captain," Peter Pan said mischievously. "I'm going to have such fun playing with you again."

Chapter End Notes

Iapetus is from Greek Mythology.

Peter Pan is from Once Upon a Time.
Friends on the Other Side

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Doom paced around his lab, Loki's words from yesterday ringing in his ears.

"Why does Thor continue to subject himself to the ephemeral? Whether this day or the next or a hundred years from now, his mortal pets will die. It's nothing. A heartbeat. Whatever love they granted him will be snatched away by the vicissitudes of mortality. What is the use in so temporary a pleasure?"

Doom knew quite well that when Loki was talking about Thor's attachments to mortals, he was really talking about his relationship to Doom. Doom's mortality was a weakness, and Loki was wrestling with his own attachment to the ephemeral. The vagaries of time would not claim a victory over Doom. That simply could not be allowed. If Loki had doubts about Doom's mortalities now, then now was the time to conquer the inevitable.

The path to immortality had many roads, but there was only one that would set him on the same path as Loki. Therefore, it was the only one to take. Doom twirled his cape around dramatically as he vanished into a Corridor of Darkness with his new mission in mind.

Doom would acquire the Golden Apples of Idunn.

Hades pulled out all the stops. The finest nectar and ambrosia spread was out for the Fates' visit. Hades even got the really nice mealworms that had to be specially conjured and weren't just kept frozen and reheated. There was no way in Tartarus that the Fates would turn down Hades's request for psychic reading this time.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" the Fates shouted in unison.

Or so Hades thought.

"Ladies, c'mon, please, throw me a bone here," Hades pleaded through gritted teeth.

"Your prophesized release of the Titans earned us considerable anger from Zeus," Lachesis hissed.

"We'll not share fate with you again," Atropos warned.

"No matter how much you flirt," Clotho added, though she seemed a bit uncertain of that.

In a literal blink of an eye (a magic all-seeing eye, of course), the Fates vanished from the Eminence Palace, leaving Hades with nothing. Hades took a deep breath and let out a sigh. He would remain calm. He would... remain... calm. He would... NOT.

"GRAAAAAAGGHHHHHHH!" Hades roared with fury as his temper flared and bright yellow flames exploded in every direction.


Pain and Panic, hearing their master's call materialized in front of him.
"Present and accounted for, boss!" Panic boasted.

Hades extended his arms outward and unleashed a powerful jet of flames into his two minions who shrieked with pain.

"I take it from the sound of the screaming that the Fates refused?" Grimhilde asked as she strolled into the chambers.

"NOT the time, Queenie," Hades warned.

"Fortunately for you, I've found a better option through the mirror," Grimhilde boasted smugly.

Hades gritted his teeth. He hated that Grimhilde could show him up so easily. However, if it meant finding the Gems of Cronus, Hades could swallow his pride.

"Fine," Hades sighed. "Give me the IV-I-I."

Loki flitted into the chamber where Russell, Ardyn, Amora, and Blackheart sat waiting. Loki was very visibly agitated in a way that the other four had scarcely ever seen before. Amora had known Loki longer than anyone in the Overtakers, so she couldn't resist taking a bit of schadenfreude at the Liesmith's discomfort. He so rarely showed weakness in his confident strutting about that one had to appreciate the little moments when the façade vanished.

"You're all present," Loki remarked. "Good. Good. You four will suffice."

"Might I implore you to ask exactly what it is we will suffice for?" Ardyn asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Amora asked. "His sweetheart has gotten himself in danger, and we need to rescue him."

"That's enough out of you, Amora," Loki sneered. "Trust that I'd never have invited you if this task did not absolutely require your presence."

"What's wrong?" Russell asked. "Did somethin' happen to Doom?"

"If he got crushed by the titan that escaped from the garage, that's not my fault!" Blackheart said.

"What?" Loki asked.

"What?" Blackheart replied.

Loki shook his head, unwilling to unpack whatever that was about.

"I... may have given Victor reason to think his mortality was insufficient," Loki explained. "And now he's galivanted off to Valhalla to hunt down the golden apples that give all Asgardians their eternal youth and longevity in order to rectify the limitations of his humanity."

"That's it?" Russell asked. "He went apple pickin'? That's the big emergency? Are we villains or farm hands?"

"In my experience, immortality is entirely overrated," Ardyn chimed in. "You've only that much longer to feel the weight of your past."

"Didn't you have Hades resurrect you because death was a worse alternative to immortality?" Blackheart asked.
"Touché," Ardyn replied.

Ironically, only Amora seemed to be taking the situation as seriously as Loki.

"Does he not realize that Odin still hungers for his blood?" Amora asked. "How could he be so stupid as to enter Odin's domain? Does the fool think he'll be able to do so with impunity after what he did? And how, exactly, does he plan to obtain the golden apples? They'll only fall to their chosen keeper, Idunn."

Amora spoke her fellow goddess's name with venomous bitterness. Long ago, Amora herself tended to Valhalla's golden apples on behalf of Asgard, but Idunn usurped that duty from her. Amora hated Idunn for stealing that which had, at one point, made the Enchantress the most special woman on Asgard. In truth, Amora's darkness and petty vanities made her far too impure to convince the tree to share its apples. Idunn was simply far more pure of heart than Amora ever was, and that fact only served to make Amora's jealousy and hatred burn hotter.

"That is precisely why we must retrieve him," Loki said.

"So go retrieve him," Blackheart said to Loki. "You're his boyfriend. Why do you need us?"

"Even with all my magic, retrieving Doom whilst evading Odin and Heimdall's notice is a bit beyond my powers," Loki explained. "A quick and clean extraction is not viable. Make no mistake, we will encounter the wrath of Asgard, and to overcome such odds we'll need all of our strength combined."

"Odds I have no desire to help you to overcome, Loki," Amora replied. "If Doctor Doom chose to go, then he has chosen his fate. I'll not lose my head to save his."

"If it's a fate of his own making, then he should be left to it," Ardyn agreed. "After all, I hardly wish to die a second time so soon after the first."

"I helped Doctor Doom save you back in Hell," Blackheart reminded Loki. "I already did my part here."

Loki gritted his teeth angrily and magic sparked from his fingertips. Russell knew better than to interject here and remained silent.

"It is amusing you three believe you have any choice in the matter!" Loki spat angrily.

From out of thin air, green and black magical chains manifested, wrapping around Amora, Ardyn, and Blackheart like a boa constrictor. The chains flashed with magic that seared the skin of their captors, causing them to cry out in pain.

"I am uncertain what makes any of you believe that you can speak to me as my equal," Loki hissed. "Perhaps it is simply my fair face that leads you to think me soft and easily argued with. So let us make one thing perfectly clear: though this is indeed Maleficent's assemblage, without Victor or myself, there would be no Overtakers. So when I tell you to do something, you do it."

Loki dismissed his mystic chains, and the three villains silently and begrudgingly submitted themselves to the will of the God of Mischief.

"Now then," Loki said as he summoned a Corridor of Darkness. "Let us depart."

Amora, Ardyn, and Blackheart quickly shuffled through the dark portal, eager not to appear to be lagging, lest they incur Loki's wrath further. Russell, however, let out a laugh and casually clapped Loki on the back.
"I quite enjoyed that," Russell remarked. "So forceful and domineering. It was sexy as fuck."

"Would that we were not tied to others," Loki mused. "I would show you just how much more forceful I can be."

Russell simply laughed again. "You would've thought I'd've learned my lesson about flirting with sexy vengeful Vikings, but nope."

Russell shot Loki a wink and proceeded through the portal.

Hades and Grimhilde ducked down the alley and gazed upon the illuminated sign: Doctor Facilier's Voodoo Emporium.

"A literal back alley fortuneteller?" Hades asked. "Really? I mean, hey, no disrespect to gypsies, tramps, and thieves, they keep the lights on for me down under, but we need somebody who can see through the timeline of the cosmos!"

"The mirror is not wrong," Grimhilde insisted. "It revealed that this man holds the power to find what we seek, and therefore he must indeed possess extraordinary foresight."

Grimhilde gave the front door a light shove, and it creaked open eerily, inviting the two villains to step in.

"Knock, knock, anybody home!" Hades called out as he stepped into the shop.

The curtains on the far side of the wall fluffed out as a tall African-American man clad in an ill-fitting purple and black suit emerged from the back in the most dramatic way possible.

"Welcome, welcome all y'all to Doctor Facilier's Voo-," but Facilier stopped short once he got a good look at his two customers.

While a bit unusual, the woman dressed in queenly garb was innocuous enough. After all, Big Daddy La Bouff's precious little girl always seemed to be wearing a new princess dress. However, the flaming hair and grey-blue skin of her companion told Facilier that his newest patrons possessed unearthly powers. This would be no con job.

"Well now, what have we here?" Facilier asked. "Y'all sure ain't the usual sort of folks waltzing about the streets of New Orleans. Who might I be in the company of?"

"You're the fortune teller, you tell me," Hades remarked skeptically.

Grimhilde simply rolled her eyes at her companion's standoffishness. "I am Queen Grimhilde, and my companion is Hades, Lord of the Dead."

Facilier knew the tales of the Greek mythological Hades quite well. He'd never really believed that the Greek gods were anything more than just stories, but the same was often thought of his Friends on the Other Side and they were quite real. "Grimhilde," wasn't exactly an immediately obvious name for Facilier to recognize, but he vaguely remembered a beautiful yet evil sorceress by that name in Norse mythology. If this woman was keeping company with the Lord of the Dead, there was very little chance that they weren't connected.

"I am truly honored to have such powerful guests in my humble abode," Facilier said with a dramatic bow. "How may I be of service?"
"We seek an artifact of great power hidden across time," Grimhilde explained. "You, as I understand, possess the means to see into the future as well as the past."

"That I do, but nothin' in this world or the next comes free, even for mythic megastars like yourselves," Facilier explained.

"Okay, how 'bout you do the reading, and I won't PERSONALLY ACQUAINT YOU WITH YOUR ANCESTORS!" Hades said flaring up orange to intimidate the voodoo sorcerer.

"Calm yourself, Hades," Grimhilde commanded. "Threats of violence will give him no incentive to not lead us astray. We shall pay fair compensation for our reading, and, good doctor, we expect the most thorough results for our coin."

"Madam, you wound me to insinuate that I'm not a hundred percent truthful with my readings," Facilier said. "I always tell folks exactly what's in the cards. Now how well they choose to interpret that information is another matter entirely."

"Understood," Grimhilde agreed.

The queen snapped her fingers, and, in a swirl of dark magic, a treasure chest materialized in Facilier's arms. Facilier struggled under the box's weight and set it down on a workbench next to him. He greedily undid the latch and gasped when he saw the pile of gold inside. Facilier snatched up a coin and bit into it to confirm its validity. The queen certainly wasn't kidding when she said that she intended to pay for her reading.

"This'll do quite nicely," Facilier said with a grin.

Facilier rapped him cane on the wooden floorboards, and, as he did, music began to echo throughout the shop, coming from regions beyond. Facilier snapped his fingers as he illuminated a circular table on the far side of the room.

"Sit down at my table," Facilier began to sing. "Put your minds at ease. If you relax it will enable me to do anything I please."

Grimhilde and Hades sat down at the table as instructed.

"I can read your future," Facilier continued to sing as he danced around the table. "I can change it 'round some too! I look deep into your heart and soul."

Facilier stopped short when his gaze fell upon Hades. "Uh, you've got a soul, don't ya?"

Hades shook his head, but Facilier merely shrugged and continued singing. "Make your wildest dreams come true! I've got voodoo, I've got hoodoo, I've got things I ain't even tried!"

Facilier then took his seat across from the two Overtakers. "And I've got friends on the other side."

"He's got friends on the other side," the voodoo masks hanging on the wall echoed.

"Yeah, me too, big whoop," Hades said. "C'mon, c'mon already!"

"The cards, the cards, the cards will tell," Facilier sang as he showed off with elaborate card tricks, "the past, the present, and the future as well. The cards, the cards, just take three. Take a lil' trip into your future with me!"

"... You done with the musical number?" Hades asked.
Facilier shrugged. "Sure. Now listen here. This deck of cards ain't exactly your conventional tarot deck. It's powered by my friends on the other side. You think real hard about your question and draw three cards: one for the past, one for the present, and one for the future. And remember, my fiery friend, the tarot cards don't lie."

Facilier fanned out his deck, and Hades did as he was instructed. After choosing, Facilier dismissed the other cards and spread the chosen three out on the table in front of Hades and Grimhilde.

"Now I take it y'all know all about the past, so I won't dwell," Facilier said as he turned over the first card which bore the image of Cronus equipped with three gems. "Ol' daddy Cronus had three gems to control time and space." Facilier waved his hands over the card and the image changed to Zeus throwing the gems away. "But the titan king got taken down a notch, and his oldest boy threw those gems away into the time stream."

"Indeed so," Grimhilde nodded.

"Yeah, yeah, nobody likes a showoff," Hades grumbled.

Grimhilde smirked. "He's only irritated because your knowing the story of the gems confirms that your powers are genuine."

"Isn't that why you came here?" Facilier asked, confused.

"It is," Grimhilde nodded. "But you were my discovery after his cosmic crones proved unwilling to aid in our affairs."

"CAN WE MOVE ON ALREADY?" Hades asked as his hair began to flare.

"Very well," Facilier nodded in agreement as he turned over the next card, a card depicting Grimhilde and Hades with the shadow of Maleficent looming behind them. "And now y'all are seekin' those gems on behalf of an evil fairy named Maleficent, eh? Think they'll be the keys to multi-world conquest, do ya?"

"Alright, look we came here for answers, so let's just skip to the answers part, 'kay?" Hades said. "'Cuz I know all this already, and it really doesn't impress me that you do too."

"Touchy touchy," Facilier said with a click of his tongue.

Facilier turned over the final card. This one depicted a gemstone engulfed in purple flames sitting amongst a barren burgundy landscape with a shattered moon looming overhead.

"Looks like you'll find the first of your gems, the gem hidden in fire," Facilier said. "It's tucked away between ticks of the clock, and it'll only manifest once you get there, hothead."

"Where is that?" Hades asked, squinting hard at the card.

"It's the former domain of a certain God of Darkness," Facilier answered, "located on a world known only as Remnant."

Idunn sat beneath her golden apple trees with a book in hand. Though she had no need to pick from the trees this day, she found their shade to be a serene comfort. Asgardian halls were loud and boisterous as warriors drank and shouted tales of their glory. Idunn loved all of Asgard, and she'd never trade it for all the gold in a dragon's lair. However, some days it was nice to be all alone in the quiet with nothing but beautiful poems to keep her company.
However, her solitude did not last. As she enjoyed her book, a high-pitched piercing sound rang in her ears over and over. Idunn couldn't explain why, but it caused her to seize up and drop her book to the ground. Idunn tried to move, but she found herself frozen, as if she'd lost all motor functions. Her heart throbbed loudly, trying in vain to pump blood to her limbs to rejuvenate them, but nothing helped. She was a prisoner in her own body.

"Sonic induced temporary paralysis," Doom announced as he stepped into view and shut off the sonic device in his hand.

Despite the fact that his machine was turned off, Idunn still could not move or speak. However, she recognized Doom well from his siege on Asgard.

"The effects of the device will wear off in ten minutes," Doom assured her. "Until then, you are fully at my mercy, but do not fear. Doom is no Hoder. I care not for your flesh, beautiful though it may be. The prize I seek is your golden apples."

Doom strutted towards the lowest hanging branch of the tree and grabbed onto the lowest hanging fruit. Doom smiled to himself. He had the secret of immortality in the palm of his hand. He pulled the fruit to free it from the tree, but it did not budge. Doom growled and pulled even harder, yet still the apple did not come loose. This time Doom poured all his dark magic into severing the stem from the branch as he tugged, yet still the apple remained firmly secured to the tree without a single bruise on its skin. Idunn could not laugh through the paralysis, but she felt a surge of pride in her tree as it refused to yield to Doom.

"It seems the tree will not share its fruit to any but its guardian," he said. "Yet Doom will persist. Once you regain movement, beautiful Idunn, you will pick the apples for Doom."

*Unlikely.* Idunn thought to herself. Yet if Doom was so arrogant as to think she would bend so easily to his will, then Idunn had no intentions of giving him evidence to the contrary. Once he allowed her freedom to move, she would draw her blade and fight the foul villain to the death. What Idunn did not know, however, was that Doom left nothing to chance. Amongst his many dark powers learned from Morgan le Fay, he was a master of hypnosis. As Idunn felt herself regaining feeling in her body, Doom knelt down in front of her.

"Look into my eyes, girl, deeply!" Doom ordered, and Idunn, unable to resist, obeyed. "Feel your will begin to loosen, to flow, to become my own! Crumble before my iron-"

But Doom found himself blasted backwards. If it hadn't been for his armor, the blast would have seared him to a crisp. Despite every inch of his body protesting in pain, Doom lifted himself up to face his attacker.

"You have no Twilight Sword to aid you this time, Doom!" Odin growled as he held the mighty spear Gungir aloft. "You are a foolish, arrogant mortal to dare return to my realm after your transgressions! And for that, you will suffer!"

Chapter End Notes

Doctor Facilier is from The Princess and the Frog, as is his song, "Friends on the Other Side."
Idunn and Odin are from Marvel comics.
Loki, Russell, Blackheart, Ardyn, and Amora emerged from the darkness amidst the woods just beyond Valhalla. The verdant forest offset the night sky, yet despite the lack of sunlight, the surrounding environment was as clear as day, a result of Valhalla's unique magic.

"Be on your guard," Loki ordered as he pressed towards the front of the group. "Heimdall will have seen us arrive by now. He'll dispatch Valkyries at best and Odin himself at worst."

"Knowin' our luck, it'll be Odin," Russell said. "I'm just gonna go right ahead and operate under that assumption until I'm proven wrong."

"To think that the realm of the gods would appear so... similar to the Earthly plan," Ardyn remarked, looking slightly disappointed at the surrounding trees.

"You should visit Hell some time," Blackheart remarked. "You'd love it. Brimstone everywhere and the sweet music of the screams of the damned as their eyeballs are torn from their skulls and hot lava is poured into their empty sockets."

"Now you're just enticing me with beautiful imagery," Ardyn remarked wistfully.

"What? Am I not beautiful imagery enough already?" Blackheart asked in mock offense.

"Oh no, pardon my most egregious oversight!" Ardyn said with a smirk. "A face as fair and full of evil intent as yours is a rare beauty indeed."

"You. I like you," Blackheart replied with a laugh.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you two will be very happy together," Amora said with a groan, "but we do have a rescue to attend to."

"Indeed," Loki replied. "Idunn's orchard is just beyond those trees. Doom will likely already."

But Loki was interrupted by an unexpected energy blast which fired all around the five Overtakers, causing them to be knocked back. Loki and Russell managed to land on their feet, but their companions were less lucky and less graceful, tumbling down into the dirt. Loki quickly rose to his full height, fanned out his cape, and summoned his staff to his hands.

"Who dares to strike me?" Loki roared at the trees.
However, it was not a Valkyrie that emerged from the shadows, nor was it any Asgardian. Loki scowled angrily as the violet and silver armor of Koragg the Knight Wolf came into view. The knight's sword was drawn and ready.

"On your feet! All of you!" Koragg ordered.

"Another of your friends, I take it?" Ardyn asked as he brushed the dirt off his jacket.

"A puppet who should have remained lost after his strings were severed," Loki answered. "You do Odin's bidding now, half-thing?"

"Not a chance," Koragg replied. "I come to exact my vengeance upon the Overtakers. However, true to my honor, my quarrel is solely with those who had a hand in the destruction of the Master and of Xehanort."

Koragg gestured with his sword at Amora and Ardyn, indicating that they should leave. After all, only Loki, Russell, and Blackheart were members of the Overtakers when Xehanort and the Master were destroyed. Amora and Ardyn looked to Loki for some sign of what they should do. Loki was far more fearsome than Koragg as far as either of them were concerned.

"Go, find Victor," Loki ordered. "Provide him whatever aid you can. The rest of us will catch up momentarily."

Koragg growled at Loki's remark, but allowed Amora and Ardyn to pass, as per his word.

Blackheart let out an evil laugh and cracked his knuckles.

"Much better," Blackheart said. "Now it's just old friends. I've been waiting to tear out your entrails and wear them as a scarf since the first time I laid eyes on you!"

"Then let us battle!" Koragg bellowed.

The two sides ran towards one another, weapons drawn.

It was a new day in Gotham. Nyssa al Ghul's plans to wipe Gotham off the map had been thwarted, Bane and his lackeys were safely locked away in a military prison, and the reunification of Gotham City with the main land was well under way. The gangs that had taken over Gotham during the blackout were being torn apart and incarcerated, which meant it was the perfect time for Fish Mooney to return. After all, Gotham would need its queen to fill the power vacuum of the criminal underground. Fish and Ursula in her Vanessa disguise arrived through a Corridor of Darkness just outside the Cobblepot Manor, formerly the home of Penguin's father, Elijah Van Dahl.

"Looks like this place hasn't been very well taken care of lately," Ursula remarked, glancing at the overgrown lawn and rotten wood.

"From what I heard from his guards last time I was here," Fish replied, thinking back to the night she rescued Butch, "my little Penguin moved into city hall after the blackout to establish a stronghold. But with reunification underway, he'll have returned to his roots. Besides, the lights are all on."

"I'm excited to meet Penguin after all you've told me of him," Ursula said. "He sounds like exactly our kind of guy."

"I held off bringing him into the fold on account of Butch," Fish explained. "But with Steve's incompetence in getting the Undertakers out of prison and Daken taking over the criminal empire that is rightfully mine, I need to bolster my power with those I know I can trust."
Ursula tapped a fingernail against the front door, and it swung open to allow them access. The two villainesses walked right in as if they owned the place.

"You think Penguin'll be eager to help you?" Ursula asked. "From the sounds of things, you've had some rough seas between you."

"I think he will," Fish said with a smile. "Besides, he won't refuse when I renew my offer to help him kill Edward Nygma."

The two women rounded the corner into the manor's office... only to walk in on Penguin and Edward Nygma, the Riddler, locking lips in front of the fire place.

"Or perhaps that won't be happening," Fish corrected.

At the sound of Fish's voice, Penguin and Riddler broke away from their kiss. Penguin let out a dramatic gasp, and his face went stark white. Fish laughed; she simply couldn't help herself. Butch had always said that she knew how to make an entrance without trying, and this was just too delicious not to milk for all it was worth.

"Fish?" Penguin whispered, still unsure if he was seeing things.

"I know, I know, it's astonishing," Fish said with a grin, echoing her words from long ago. "Sometimes I astonish myself."

"No. No, no, no! I SAW YOU DIE!" Penguin replied. "I held you in my arms, and you said you were actually done for this time. You can't be real! You're... you're... Basil Karlo, or... or..."

"When you threw me over the warehouse roof into the river below, the last thing I said before I died was 'It's all good,'" Fish recounted. "The only other person who would know that is Butch. So, yes, I'm quite real."

"But...but... how? Hugo Strange didn't-," Penguin stuttered.

"Honey, I rose up from the dead," Fish said with a shrug. "I do it all the time."

Riddler inched away from Fish cautiously. The one interaction he'd had with the woman, she'd had her stooges pointing machine guns at him. As close as he and Penguin had become, he had no idea where he would stand with Fish with regards to whatever it was that she was obviously planning. This motion was not lost on Fish.

"You've got nothing to fear from me, Mr. Nygma," Fish said. "Any friend of Oswald's is a friend of mine."

"Yes, I'm aware of how you changed your tune on him," Riddler said. "Forgive me if I'm still a bit hesitant around you after you tried to murder me last time."

"Now, now, Ed, play nice," Penguin urged. "Everyone in this room has tried to kill one another at some point. Except... umm... I'm sorry, who are you again?"

Penguin gestured to Ursula, who was lurking behind Fish, observing this scene play out.

"Ursula," she answered. "You could say I'm Fish's new partner in crime... Well, one of a few, actually."

"I've made quite a lot of new friends since I saw you last," Fish added. "It's... a bit of a complicated
story, and, well, maybe you two had better see for yourself. Ursula, show them."

Riddler and Penguin gasped and looked on in mild horror and disgust as the beautiful visage of Vanessa tore apart into pieces and Ursula's true form spilled out right in front of them.

"Mmm, feels good to stretch my tentacles," Ursula remarked.

"Are you... some sort of alien?" Penguin asked, unable to peel his eyes away from the sea-witch.

"No... well, kind of but not exactly," Ursula answered. "I'm actually a type of mermaid known as an octopin."

"Mermaid? Really?" Riddler asked skeptically.

"That's far from the strangest thing," Fish replied. "Perhaps you two had best sit down for this next part...."

Doom stumbled away in pain into the cover of the orchard as Odin pushed forward unrelentingly. Doom tried to muster the magic to summon a Corridor of Darkness away from Valhalla, but the darkness would not come to his aid.

"Why won't it heed my orders?" Doom wondered aloud.

Odin's deep laughter echoed throughout the orchard despite him being no where in sight.

"Think you to be the first to wield darkness against me?" Odin asked. "I battled against dark elves before your race invented the wheel! You'll not be able to cower back into the darkness whilst in my presence!"

Doom cursed under his breath. With no Twilight Sword to aid him this time, defeating Odin was going to prove a nigh impossible feat. Yet Doom was never one to shy away from such a task. He'd built his reputation by powering through any obstacles in his way, and if that obstacle happened to be a god, Doom would press on as always. Odin would be well guarded against magic, but maybe technology could get the better of the old fool.

Doom waited until his scanners identified that Odin was close before he emerged from his hiding place and activated the time machine. Doom summoned up a cube of chronal energy that surrounded Odin, similar to the one used to defeat Ansem. Odin, however, was not frozen in between seconds as he should have been. The angered king of Asgard unleashed a wave of Odinforce energy that shattered the time prison as if it were glass.

"You thought to use time to best me?" Odin asked. "Perhaps that may have worked on a lesser god, but not so against the All-Father!"

"Perhaps this will fare better," a voice called out.

Before Odin could gaze upon the face of the man who had spoken, blades illuminated by pink energy flew towards him. Odin only just managed to put up a deflection shield to avoid being sliced to ribbons. The impact forced the All-Father back away from Doom. As his blades vanished and returned to the aether in which he kept them, Ardy Izunia casually strolled out from the trees with his typical smug smirk never leaving his face.

"YOU DARE TO STRIKE A GOD?" Odin roared at the newcomer.
"I'm not exactly fond of gods," Ardyn replied. "Bad previous experiences. You understand."

"Perhaps a goddess will be more to your liking, Ardyn," Amora said as she emerged as well. "I promise we're far more diverting than arrogant men who believe themselves omnipotent."

"ENCHANTRESS! This treachery will not go unpunished!" Odin warned.

"It won't?" Amora responded, playing coy.

Amora fired a bolt of bright green magic from her hand that struck Odin in the shoulder. Odin roared with anger at the impertinence as the spell warped him away from the orchard. It would only inconvenience Odin for a moment, but a moment was all they needed.

"Oops," she replied slyly.

"What are you two doing here?" Doom growled as he dashed over to his allies' side. "Doom had everything under control!"

"What? No thanks for your friends?" Ardyn asked.

"Believe me, I wish that I was not here," Amora answered. "Were it not for Loki's insistence, I would not be. But we should leave quickly before the All-Father returns."

The implication that Loki sent him a rescue team caused a rush of complicated emotions to wash over Doom. The flattery that Doom felt at Loki's caring enough to send him help quickly gave way to feelings of wounded pride at the notion that Loki thought him too weak to handle Asgard on his own.

Doom began to reply. "You both can inform Loki that I do not."

But Doom was interrupted by the crackling of energy as Odin returned to the orchard, his fury practically radiating off of him.

"You. DARE. To Humiliate. ME?" Odin growled through gritted teeth. "You. Three. Shall. SUFFER!"

"Oh dear," Ardyn said in a manner that was far too casual. "We made him mad."

Koragg unleashed a wave of energy from his sword that forced the three Overtakers backwards. The three rose to their feet, with Loki in the center and Russell and Blackheart flanking him to either side. Koragg summoned up a hoard of dragoon nobodies to back him up. His foot soldiers formed a horseshoe shape in front of Loki, Russell, and Blackheart with the intent of keeping the three Overtakers from pressing onward. The notion, however, was simply comical to Loki.

"Leave these weak creatures to me," Loki said as he stepped forward in front of Russell and Blackheart.

Koragg raised his blade into the air. "FOR THE MASTER! ATTACK!"

Loki cocked his eyebrow at the onrushing enemies and glanced down at his staff thoughtfully. This was almost too easy. Loki reared back the staff and unleashed a blast of energy that vaporized several dragoons and sent the rest tumbling away to avoid the explosion. Loki twirled his staff around with surprising swiftness and launched another blast into the dragoons on the other side. Koragg held sturdy and did not recoil from the flames exploding around him.
The surviving dragoons took to the skies and attempted to divebomb Loki with their lances. However, though they were intelligent enough to change their strategy, they inadvertently made Loki's task easier by collecting into a single uniform formation. Yawning at how simple a task this was, Loki fired a single blast of energy from his staff and vaporized the flying nobodies. Loki then used his staff to direct the fiery explosion to crash at Koragg's feet. Koragg barely managed to use a wind spell to fly out of the way before the explosion could make short work of him.

Loki laughed at his opponent's flailing. "I didn't get the chance to destroy your master personally. I fear that killing you won't yield the same sense of satisfaction."

Koragg, however, did not let Loki's words get to him. He landed back on the ground, and immediately opened the sliding hatch of his shield, revealing his most powerful weapon: the Eye of the Master.

"WOLF ATTACK!" Koragg bellowed as he launched two purple phantom wolves from the eye of his shield.

Loki, for once, found himself unprepared for the attack. The wolf rammed into Loki's chest, sending the Liesmith tumbling backwards into Russell and Blackheart. Loki recognized the spell's power as being tied to the Master himself, which made Loki silently thankful that the damage was not more extensive. However, if Koragg was pulling out magic of that potency, Loki knew he could scarcely afford to continue to toy with his enemy so casually. He needed to finish this now.

As Koragg geared up for another attack, Loki teleported himself behind Koragg and thrust the uru blade at the tip of his staff into Koragg's back. Though Koragg's armor was indeed powerful and protected him from the worst of the attack, Loki could feel his staff pierce flesh beneath the armor, and when he tore the staff out, the tip was dripping with red. The injured Koragg swung wildly at Loki and successfully decapitated the illusion that Loki left in his place.

Loki whispered an incantation, harnessing the blood coating the tip of the staff. Loki then fired another blast of magic that, thanks to the blood magic, was able to seek out the wound. The magic wormed in through the open wound and started coursing through Koragg's bloodstream, burning the dark knight from the inside. As Koragg cried out in agony, he vanished into a Corridor of Darkness. Loki hoped that the knight would simply perish in the realm between, but he knew that was wishful thinking.

"Come," Loki said to his companions, "Victor will still need our help."

Loki, Russell, and Blackheart made their way through the woods to the orchard of Idunn's golden apples to find their companions locked in combat. Doom, Ardyn, and Amora were all three battling against Odin at once, and, by the looks of things, the three Overtakers were struggling just to survive the wrath of the All-Father. With an incoherent growl, Odin unleashed a shockwave that sent his three opponents tumbling backwards. Loki gave a light bit of sarcastic applause, which instantly caught Odin's attention.

"Loki," Odin practically whispered in recognition.

"Hello father," Loki said with a smug wave. "Have I made you proud?"

"For the sake of your mother, boy, I grant you this one final chance," Odin said, "leave now or I will be forced to destroy you along with the vulgar company you keep."

"I'm afraid, dear father, that will not come to pass this day," Loki said. "For, you see, I finally learned the same lesson Thor learned all those years ago: united we stand. Overtakers Assemble!"
Ardyn and Blackheart joined arms and began to dance around the battlefield with dark magic and royal arm blades hurrying towards Odin. They spun and twirled together in such a way that Odin couldn't even touch them without feeling the sting of an attack. As the two continued their demonic tango around the All-Father, they cackled with fiendish glee.

Amora's hands began to glow with a green mystical fog as she prepared her spell, but, rather than firing upon Odin, she unleashed her magic on Russell. Russell began radiating green energy, and he let out a triumphant laugh at the newfound power. Then, looking like a green comet, he dashed back and forth across the battlefield, crashing into Odin along every path. Odin stumbled around, feeling quite disoriented by the attacks.

Loki then looked to Doom who nodded in agreement. They didn't need words to communicate what they were going to do next. The two men stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Loki raised his left arm while Doom raised his right. Where their two arms came together, a large shimmering emerald blade of magic took form above their heads. Loki and Doom levitated into the air, and, moving as if they were one in the same, they sliced the energy blade across Odin once, then twice, then three times, before finally ending their assault with a fourth slash cutting Odin right down the middle.

Odin, badly scarred and bleeding profusely, stumbled backwards and vanished into a flash of energy. Loki knew his father would survive, but that didn't make the taste of victory against Odin any less sweet.

"Fate has truly smiled upon us this day!" Loki said with a laugh as he twirled around with utter glee. "We defeated Odin!"

"Temporarily," Amora reminded him. "We need not celebrate so ephemeral a victory."

"Perhaps there is value in that which is ephemeral," Loki said. Though he was speaking to Amora, his eyes remained on Doom.

"I certainly will always relish inflicting such pain unto Odin, even if it was merely a small fraction of that which we suffered at his hands," Doom remarked. "Though Doom is hardly thrilled at the interference, I must admit myself glad that you and I were able to share in that moment, Loki."

Doom and Loki shared a silent glance, and, in that moment, they knew that any ill will between them was at an end. There were bigger and better things for them to focus on, and they would do so together.

The tips of Russell's hair were still smoking for that surge of power he received from Amora. The vampire king seemed like he'd just shot an energy drink directly into his veins. He was practically bouncing in place.

"That was fuckin' amazin'!" Russell said. "I didn't even know we could do that! I feel like I could massacre an entire city state in one go! Who wants to race me? I'll kick everyone's ass! Ha HA!"

"Do not expend your energies unnecessarily," Amora warned. "Take this time to wind down. We'd scarcely want your heart to burst within your chest."

Russell shrugged. "It'd heal by itself."

"Odin will send reinforcements after us," Amora stated, turning towards the rest of the group. "We'd best take our leave at once."

"Not without what I came for," Doom insisted.
Doom beckoned that Idunn come forth. Doom's hypnosis still held the goddess in thrall. Idunn plucked a single golden apple from her tree and walked it over to Doom with an outstretched hand. However, before Doom could take it from her, Loki snatched it away.

"Loki, give me the apple," Doom ordered.

"I will," Loki agreed. "But first we have much to discuss, and this place is not the proper setting. Shall we return to the castle?"

Doom reluctantly agreed, and the six Overtakers warped away from the orchards of Asgard, slinking back into the darkness.

Maleficent stared at the card that Hades and Grimhilde were given by Doctor Facilier. Though she herself had never personally set foot on Remnant, she knew of the world by reputation. Acquiring this first gemstone would not be an easy task.

"You are certain that this Voodoo sorcerer spoke the truth?" Maleficent asked.

Hades, Grimhilde, and Jafar were all present in Maleficent's office. She had, in truth, wanted all of her original seven Overtakers present for this discussion, but apparently most of her team had business elsewhere today.

"Well-," Hades began.

"Yes, we are quite certain," Grimhilde interrupted to prevent Hades's bitterness from casting doubt upon their discovery. "His connection to the Voodoo demons provided a powerful insight that I trust."

"Then Remnant shall be our next destination," Maleficent declared.

"Delightful," Jafar said with disinterest. "But I grow increasingly concerned with one of our own. Hook has still not returned from Storybrooke."

"It has been too long since he was left there," Maleficent agreed. "Grimhilde, take Jafar to your mirror. Find Hook and ensure that he is returned to us safely."

"Yes, your grace," Grimhilde said with a curtsey.

Grimhilde and Jafar turned and exited the office, leaving Hades and Maleficent alone together.

"I fear our assemblage has grown larger than I can manage," Maleficent said once she was certain that Jafar and Grimhilde were out of earshot. "I regret that I had forgotten about Hook until Jafar brought him to my attention."

"You've got a lot on your mind, babe, don't sweat the details," Hades assured her. "Besides, there's only a few of us who actually matter."

"All the same, I would prefer to keep the acquisition of the gems within the Overtakers who have earned my trust," Maleficent said. "The original seven, Grimhilde, Cruella, Newlin, and perhaps Ardyn and Blackheart."

"Not Pete?" Hades asked

"I trust his fear," Maleficent remarked. "But his lack of a backbone clued Xehanort into my plans once before. I will not allow the past to repeat itself."
"Don't forget, this is your show," Hades reminded her. "If there's anybody you want gone, then, hey, say the word and they're gone."

"Though many are varying degrees of untrustworthy," Maleficent said, "the one who troubles me most is Imperious. It is not a matter of *if* he betrays us but *when*. Also, those Organization miscreants who claim to share the common goal of destroying Cronus. They are not Overtakers at all, and thus they should only be seen as potential enemies."

"Want me to torch 'em all?" Hades asked.

"Patience," Maleficent said. "We cannot afford to dispose of our allies without just cause at so critical a junction. However, we must remain ever vigilant. The Overtakers are not the small gathering of villains they once were."

Hook was chained against the wall, his restraints holding him up and preventing him from having even the minor relief of sitting down. Blood caked his face and chest, his mouth felt dry and cotton-like, and the scars left by Pan's dagger stung every time he failed to put his mind to other things.

"You have a surprisingly high tolerance for pain, captain," Pan said in a voice that was far too chipper for the circumstances.

"When you get hurt as often as I do, it's a necessity," Hook managed to reply with just a hint of smug satisfaction.

Pan grabbed a handful of Hook's hair and yanked his head back. Pan grinned down at the pirate with a crazy look in his eye.

"Good," Pan said. "That means more fun for me."

"That'll be quite enough," a voice said, earning a groan of irritation from Pan.

Hook managed to glance up to see a figure wrapped up in a black cloak that obstructed their face and body. Hook couldn't even really tell if the figure was male or female. The voice seemed vaguely familiar, even though it was obviously being disguised whether by science or sorcery.

"Cronus left the captain in my care," Pan argued. "He's *my* toy to play with as I like!"

"He's not a toy, he's an *asset,*" the hooded figure argued. "Ultron didn't grab him just so you could have your way with him. We need him in tact to use against Maleficent."

Pan sneered and headed for the door. He bumped his shoulder against the hooded figure as he walked out.

"You might be Cronus's favorite for now," Pan said as he left, "but we'll see how the pieces fall when everything is said and done."

The hooded figure reached into their cloak and produced a canteen of water. They held the canteen up to Hook's face.

"Here, you should drink something," the figure said. "Don't worry. It's just water."

"If you think a small act of kindness will appear as balm enough to buy my cooperation, you're sadly mistaken," Hook said.

"Understood," the figured said. "You should still drink. Even revenants need to stay hydrated."
Hook relented and took a sip from the canteen. The rush of cool water against his parched throat felt like Heaven amidst this Hell.

"Who are you?" Hook asked as the figure replaced the canteen lid and tucked it into their cloak.

"You could say I'm Cronus's second-in-command," the figure answered.

"I meant your name, not whatever over-inflated ego fuel title you think yourself to possess," Hook said.

Even though Hook couldn't see the figure's face below the hood, he had the distinct sense that the figure was smirking at that remark.

"Fair enough," the figure said. "Perhaps you should look upon the face of your captor."

The figure pulled back their hood, exposing their face. Hook's eyes widened in disbelief.

"You? But....," Hook said. "But... you're an Overtaker!"

Chapter End Notes

Penguin and Riddler are both the versions from Gotham.

Loki and Doom's combo move is blatantly ripped off from Sora and Riku's combo move from Dream Drop Distance and KH3 because I love it... Uh... I mean... it's a totally intentionally parallel I'm drawing to the status of important synchronistic true love or something... No, I did it because it's cool XD
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Victor watched as Loki tossed the golden apple up and caught it again. Up against the gloomy purple cobblestone walls of the Eminence Palace, the golden apple shone vibrantly. Loki was practically dangling the mythic fruit in front of Victor, and Victor did not appreciate that one bit. He appreciated it only slightly less than having to have this discussion out of his armor, another request made by the Liesmith.

"Enough of this, Loki," Victor said. "If you wish to speak to me, then do so. Cease this mischief."

"You tell me of all beings to cease mischief?" Loki asked with a laugh. "But very well, we shall cut to the chase. You desire immortality. All for me?"

"Do not flatter yourself," Victor replied. "Immortality is a boon I have long desired. You are merely one of many incentives for Doom acquiring eternal life."

"But Doom has eternal life already, does he not?" Loki posited. "After all, you've said yourself that Doom is more than merely flesh. Doom is the story of Doom, if I recall correctly. As long as your precious robotic toys remain in play, Doom will never die."

"A true enough statement," Victor agreed. "But what point are you getting at?"

"Doom is already eternal," Loki said. "So Doom will not be the one eating the apple. Victor will, which is why I requested to speak with you directly to your face. Because I must know: does Victor desire eternal life? Or does Doom?"

"Doom is Victor, Victor is Doom," he replied, frustration evident in his voice. "I am Victor von Doom. There is no difference between the two."

Loki leaned in far closer to Victor's face than the latter was prepared for. The cold icy breath of the Liesmith, however, was enticing despite the invasion of Victor's personal space.

"Doom is your reputation and legacy; Victor is your human life. Do not confuse the two," Loki warned. "Morgan le Fay must have been a poor magic instructor indeed if she never taught you how fickle magic can be with regards to intent. If you take this golden apple, you must know with absolute clarity what you are doing. Are you extending the life of your mortal existence or are you seeking something else?"

Victor didn't respond to that. Loki's words made sense, and Victor realized how catastrophic his actions could have been if he'd acted impulsively. All the same, Victor wanted to curse Loki's name for sowing seeds of doubt in his mind. Those seeds were the Liesmith's province, and Victor could hardly afford to not consider the possibility that he was being manipulated.

"If you wished to become immortal to spend eternity with me," Loki continued, "in addition to being a wildly foolish and sentimental mistake, it would forge a most unfortunate mystic bond that would end far worse for you than for me. If you wished to become immortal to reign as Doom for eternity, it would be insufficient for such a power is already within your grasp. Only by accepting your mortality and accepting that without the apple's power you will inevitably perish will you be able to prolong your life. But only as Victor."
Loki sat the golden apple down on the table and gestured to it. Victor eyed the apple and picked it up. He felt the weight of the mystic fruit in his hand. And in that moment, he knew exactly what to do...

He threw the apple at Loki's head. It bounced off harmlessly and rolled onto the floor.

"Give me the real apple," Victor ordered.

Loki smirked. "How did you know?"

"Because I know you," Victor replied.

Loki shrugged, unable to argue with that, and tossed Victor the true golden apple. This time, Victor knew the apple he held was real. He could feel the difference in weight and the power blossoming within. Immortality was right there at his finger tips.

"To me, my Overtakers!" Maleficent's voice echoed in both their minds.

"Duty calls," Loki said with a smirk as his casual clothes transformed into his green and gold armor.

Victor scowled and put the apple away before donning his Doctor Doom armor. Loki and Doom both flounced their capes as they exited their chambers, which might have looked dramatic had the capes not collided in midair and tumbled awkwardly back to their sides. When they arrived at the breakfast-nook-turned-conference-room that Maleficent had selected as their meeting place, they found that Maleficent, Hades, and Russell had already arrived.

"It's not like Ursula and Mooney to be the last to arrive," Loki remarked. "You must've caught them during a moment of intimacy."

Maleficent shook her head. "Ursula and Fish are off on their own endeavor in Gotham City. We'll need to make due without them as we seek the first gemstone."

"Malef, c'mon, no disrespect, but this is a Gem of Cronus," Hades said. "Five of us ain't gonna cut it."

"Precisely why I've invited along two others," Maleficent stated.

Maleficent gestured to the door as Cruella and Ardyn entered the room.

"It seems we're fashionably late," Ardyn remarked.

"I'm fashionably everything, darling." Cruella stated.

"Understand that the quest for the gems is a matter of utmost confidence," Maleficent explained. "I have decided to trust you both with that which we seek, but understand that some amongst our ranks do not inspire the same confidence."

"Such as Amora the Enchantress," Loki offered. "Many times over she has betrayed me. Once, when I ruled over Asgard under the guise of Odin, she aided the heroes in removing me from power and banishing my soul into the clutches of Mephisto."

"A pity you lacked the foresight that she might attempt such a feat again," Doom remarked.

"Otherwise, you could have prevented yours and Hades's capture all those months ago."

"A mistake I do not regret," Loki said, "for it led you to finally obey the wiles of your heart. The point, however, remains that Amora cannot be trusted."
A look of confusion washed over Russell. "Then why do you keep working with her?"

Loki looked as though the answer was the most obvious thing in the world. "Because she is one of my closest friends, obviously."

"Wait," Russell began, "but-

Hades shook his head and held up a hand to cut him off. "Asgardians, babe, don't even try."

"Back to the matter at hand," Maleficent said with mild frustration present in her voice. "Cruella, you proved your loyalty to me back in Storybrooke against Rumplestiltskin. Ardyn, you provided us the means to complete the Book of Prophecies. See to it that I am given no reason to doubt that loyalty."

"You'll have none," Ardyn assured her.

"Then we shall venture forth," Maleficent said as she summoned a Corridor of Darkness to Remnant.

As the team of Overtakers vanished from the chamber, they remained blissfully ignorant to a simple fly on the wall. The insect flew with haste from the conference room to a private chamber of the Eminence Palace filled with Egyptian treasures and black magic poultices and amulets. The fly hovered in midair and, with a flash of purple, grew into a human-sized hunchbacked insect.

"There you are, Flydor!" Imperious said as he set aside his spell work. "What secrets have you brought for me today?"

"Maleficent is seeking the Gems of Cronus," Flydor buzzed in reply. "But she's keeping it a secret from all but her closest confidants."

"Oh is she?" Imperious asked with a laugh. "How intriguing! This will certainly be of use to me. But I want to know even more! Return to your duty patrolling the castle. I do so love knowing everyone's secrets!"

Fish read the freshly painted sign above the doorway of the strange little shop down by the river: Castaway Cabana. Various seashells and nautical objects decorated the store's front windows. Fish smirked to herself when she saw that one of the window features was a pirate's skeleton that casual onlookers would assume was just a fake prop. Fish entered the dimly lit shop which was filled with everything from antiques to potted plants to bottles filled with various potions. Ursula sat behind the counter openly in her true form, her tentacles hidden away behind a gauzy skirt.

"You... opened a shop?" Fish asked. "That's what you called to show me?"

"What can I say?" Ursula said with a chuckle. "I can't resist helping those poor unfortunate souls."

"And you picked Gotham of all places to get your start?" Fish asked. "Most people here don't believe in magic."

"Oh they will," Ursula assured her, "but that's neither here nor there. Let me show you the best part."

Ursula gestured for Fish to follow her into the back room. Ursula peeled back the pink and purple curtains revealing pitch darkness on the other side. Fish shot Ursula a skeptical look, but the sea witch gestured for her to step forward. Fish did so, and once she stepped through the darkness, she found herself in a room that was far too large to fit in the small Gotham store. The room was large and purple with a cauldron bubbling in the middle and potions of every size lining shelves upon shelves.
"Take a look out the window," Ursula instructed.

Fish walked over to the large bay window on the far side of the room and found herself quite surprised by what she saw: the Eminence Palace standing tall just a few blocks away.

"We're back in the Overtaken Kingdom?" Fish asked.

"Indeed we are!" Ursula said dramatically. "A little portal spell I conjured. But that's not all I've got! Come, step back into the main part of the shop."

Fish didn't know what Ursula could be getting at this time, but she obliged, stepping back into the dark portal. When she emerged, she found herself in a shop, but this shop had a different layout from the one in Gotham. A quick trot to the front windows revealed that this shop was located back in Radiant Garden.

"How many do you have?" Fish asked.

"Let's see...," Ursula began. "Not counting the back room in the Overtaken Kingdom, I have my home branch in Atlantica, a branch in a place called Knockturn Alley, a branch in Storybrooke, and then the Gotham and Radiant Garden ones you already know about."

"Color me impressed," Fish remarked. "This'll come in handy for building our criminal empire."

"And give me the opportunity to make some delicious deals," Ursula said. "After all, fish gotta swim, and birds gotta sing. Speaking of birds, do you think Penguin's gonna be able to help us?"

"I like our chances," Fish remarked. "He and I both have big names in this town even after everything. We should be able to get a grip on the criminal underworld here. Moving beyond Gotham, however, is gonna be tricky."

"Oh, Angelfish, it'll be easy!" Ursula assured her.

"What makes you say that?" Fish replied.

"Because you'll have me to help you!" Ursula declared dramatically.

Fish laughed at that, and, strangely, it actually made her feel more optimistic about the task ahead of them. Together, there was very little that she and Ursula couldn't do.

"I suppose there is that," Fish said with a smile, and she meant it.

The magic spell that Ursula cast on the doors alerted her that one of her shops had a customer.

"Looks like I've got business already," Ursula said as she flitted off back through the portal.

The magic doorbell indicated that it was her Storybrooke branch that had attracted her first mark. Unlike Gotham, everyone in Storybrooke was quite familiar with the existence of magic and magical creatures, so Ursula didn't even bother hiding her tentacles as she slithered into the shop.

"Come in, come in," Ursula beckoned. "Welcome to Castaway Cabana, home to all your heart's desires."

The man who had entered her shop was a twenty-something brunette who would have been incredibly handsome if he dressed nicer and hadn't allowed his hair and beard to become as scraggly as they were. The stench of alcohol wafted off of him, telling Ursula that he'd been drinking for some time already that day.
"I doubt my heart's desires are anywhere to be found in this shop," Prince Phillip said. "I've been told time and time again that no magic can bring back the dead."

"Not necessarily true," Ursula said. "But resurrections have certain complications. I'd be willing to give it a try... if you make it worth my while."

Phillip shook his head. "I won't dishonor Aurora and my son by disturbing their final rest. No. My vengeance is all I have left."

Ursula grinned. "Now that I can certainly help you with. Who's the target?"

"That's my business," Phillip said. "I just need a way to travel between worlds."

Ursula had her suspicions that she knew who Phillip was referring to, and that possibility could prove complicated for everyone. However, Ursula wasn't about to turn down a customer based on a hunch, and it might be better to keep an eye on him anyway. If Phillip truly was seeking revenge on Maleficent, it would be his funeral.

Ursula put on a pleasant grin and slithered down the aisle. "Let's see what I've got on my shelves...."

The image of Hook strung up by Pan, being tortured right before Jafar's eyes sent a white hot fury coursing through the evil sorcerer's veins. He was never one to admit to having feelings or experiencing love, but utter hatred was an old friend of Jafar's. And now that boiling hatred was aimed at Hook's captors.

"Cronus and his flunkies are holed up in the Underworld," Jafar spat. "We must go AT ONCE!"

"Are you mad?" Grimhilde asked. "To invade that nest of vipers would spell our doom!"

"We cannot simply leave Hook stranded there," Jafar argued. "He knows our secrets, and to allow Cronus to abduct one of our own with impunity invites disaster."

"And you care for him," Grimhilde added.

Those words stung Jafar's pride. Caring was weakness in Jafar's mind. To be accused of it was to be accused of weakness. If there was one truth Jafar valued above all others, it was that weakness could not be tolerated by anyone who wanted to survive a meaningful life.

"Do not mistake me for a sentimentalist," Jafar said. "I enjoy his company, but compassion is not in my nature."

"Is it in any of ours?" Grimhilde asked. "That does not mean that you do not care for him."

Jafar sneered. "You and Ursula both believe yourselves to know my heart. Well, you don't! And if you'll not help me to free Hook from his repugnant prison, I'll find another who will."

"I did not say that I would not help you," Grimhilde clarified. "However, rushing head first into the Underworld is a death wish."

"Then what do you suggest?" Jafar asked.

"Pardon me, I couldn't help but overhearing," Daken said as he entered the room.

The younger man's handsome yet smug face sent newfound flashes of fury through Jafar's blood. In many respects, Daken reminded Jafar of himself with just enough of Hook's sexual power and
charisma to distort the image. In that respect, Daken was the last person Jafar wanted to deal with at the moment.

"INSOLENCE!" Jafar roared. "You dare eavesdrop on ME? Back in Agrabah, I'd have had your ears cut from your head for such disrespect."

"Kinky," Daken remarked. "But I actually might have a way to rescue your pirate."

All thoughts of rage vanished from Jafar's mind. The prospect of retrieving Hook from Cronus's clutches took over Jafar's focus. He didn't like to think about what that meant, but he had to have answers immediately.

"Cease this dramatic anticipation," Jafar ordered. "Out with it!"

Daken smirked. "I know someone who broke into the Underworld right under Hades's nose."

After quick preparations were made, Jafar, Grimhilde, and Daken ventured forth into the bowls of the Underworld, being led by the most talented guide they could find.

"Guys, come on," Demyx whined. "You really picked the wrong guy for this job."

Though a breathtaking marvel from the view of one flying in, the further you got from Haven Academy, the more the streets of Mistral were wracked with poverty. Yet even in the pouring rain, the paper lantern lit streets bustled with people, and roadside street merchants sold their wares. This was the sight that greeted the Overtakers as they arrived on the world of Remnant.

"Oh the devil take it, this place is filthy!" Cruella sneered. "And there's mud on my Louboutin heels."

"Oy, and here I thought with Fishy sittin' this one out that we'd all actually wear sensible footwear for once," Hades remarked as he summoned up an umbrella for himself and Maleficent.

"It smells of an inferior nation's lack of sanitation," Doom remarked. "Latveria would never tolerate such poor conditions."

"Surely the gem of Cronus isn't located in such squalor," Loki added.

"The gem is hidden within the Land of Darkness," Maleficent reiterated. "However, that realm is currently occupied and protected by a rather powerful tenant whom I do not wish to battle unnecessarily. According to Grimhilde's mirror, allies of that tenant have recently been in this city for a failed attack on the academy."

"You believe there's a chance we can convince one of these allies to extend us an invitation back to this Land of Darkness?" Ardyn asked.

"With my glamour abilities, there isn't any no doubt on that matter," Russell chimed in.

"Indeed," Maleficent nodded. "But, if at all possible, I would prefer willing cooperation."

"Who exactly should we seek out?" Doom asked.

An electric billboard flashed onto a broadcast about criminals still at large from the attack on Haven. Five wanted posters popped onto the screen depicting criminals identified as Adam Taurus, Hazel Rainart, Mercury Black, Emerald Sustrai, and Cinder Fall. An amused smirk crossed Maleficent's
Marluxia's scythe clattered on the ground as his lifeless body slumped next to the corpses of Larxene and Luxord. Xigbar waved a hand over his Keyblade, magically cleaning it of the mess from the battle. Long ago, disposing of three of his former allies would have been a difficult task, but with Master Xehanort's Keyblade in his hands, the feat was all too simple. None of them saw their demise coming.

"I was so gracious to let those guys live after I got rid of Xehanort's heart," Xigbar remarked. "You'd think they would've been more appreciative. Hmph, as if! Gotta say, I really owe ya one for tipping me off to their little betrayal."

"Yes you do," Xigbar's companion said as he walked closer to the carnage.

Xigbar smirked at the posturing, but he was willing to humor this. Xigbar dismissed the Keyblade and crossed his arms. The side alley of Zero District wasn't one of the best lit parts of Radiant Garden, and it wasn't until the other man stepped into the light cast by the neon of a nearby bar that Xigbar got a good look at his companion's face.

"Now then," Steve Newlin said. "Let's start talkin' about what you're gonna do for me."

Chapter End Notes

Flydor is my OC, not a pre-existing character. Yes, I know the name is silly. He's a Power Rangers monster; it comes with the territory.

The World of Remnant and all associated locations and characters referenced are from RWBY. This fic intersects with canon during Volume Six (the most recent season as of posting).
When Maleficent proposed splitting up to search Mistral, Doom automatically assumed that he and Loki would partner up and have a chance to further discuss the golden apple. Things, however, did not go that way after Russell suggested that they mix up the teams a bit. That decision in and of itself wouldn't have been totally disagreeable if Doom hadn't wound up stuck with the worst possible partner of the group.

"Darling, you simply must let me redesign your outfit one of these days," Cruella said. "The tunic and the armor are so passé!"

"My armor is functional and bears the iconography of Doom," Doom insisted. "There will be no changes made by the likes of you."

"Oh, come now, I'm not talking about completely overhauling your aesthetic," Cruella said. "Just tweaking it a bit to be more cohesive. Right now with your armor worn beneath a tunic, you look like a Renaissance fair's equivalent of wearing socks and sandals. I picture you in a long coat, a fur stole draped over your shoulders, an alteration to the cut of the cape to make it-"

"ENOUGH," Doom bellowed. "There will be NO changes, and I'll hear no further discussion of the matter."

Cruella pouted but did not press her luck further. The two made their way to the outskirts of the city where the buildings became more sparse and the forest crept ever closer. A radio transmission tower stood before them, though Cruella had little to no idea what its purpose was. Doom was completely focused on some device mounted on his armored wrist. Cruella kept trying to peer over his shoulder to get a glimpse at what he was doing.

"What is that, darling?" Cruella asked, breaking the silence.

"It would take me far longer than is practical to explain myself to a technologically illiterate fool like you," Doom replied with a scoff. "Simply put, I am turning this kingdom's scanners to serve at my pleasure."

Cruella sneered. "You could have just answered the second part without insulting me, you know."

"You speak as though I did not make a cognizant choice to convey the exact sentiment that I did," Doom said haughtily.

"I'm not sure what I did to you to earn such vitriol," Cruella said, "but at the very least, you could make something of an effort seeing as we are on the same team here."

"Ms. De Vil, I am not some child helping you on a school project," Doom said as he finished fiddling with his wrist device. "This team's purpose is the total conquest of the universe. Maleficent may consider you loyal, but loyalty should never be mistaken for usefulness, something you have repeatedly failed to prove. I have little patience for wastes of space that think themselves the equals of those who provide real power."

Cruella was left with nothing to say as Doom strutted past her, flouncing his cape for dramatic effect. With her inability to kill and lack of magic beyond controlling animals, Cruella had the nagging
feeling in the back of her mind that she wasn't useful to the Overtakers, yet her ego simply wouldn't allow her to indulge the sentiment beforehand. However, now with Doom voicing those same concerns, Cruella found that she couldn't honestly say that she felt secure in her position on the team any longer.

Hades, Loki, and Ardyn made their way towards Haven Academy. The once magnificent school remained deserted after the incident that claimed Headmaster Lionheart, which made it the perfect hiding spot for any who wished to avoid the notice of the Mistral police force. As the trio entered the grand hall of the once prestigious academy, they were greeted by the sight of a marble statue depicting a woman bound and draped with golden chains.

"Now doesn't that bring back memories?" Ardyn remarked at the sight of the chained statue.

"It certainly does for me," Loki replied, thinking back to his own imprisonment in the Hall of Nastrond. "Visionary men have always been chained by those who doubt their brilliance."

"Not me, babes," Hades boasted. "Never found anybody who could chain the Lord of the Dead."

"Well then, you simply must not be visionary enough," Ardyn quipped.

"Indeed not," Loki agreed, prompting Hades to flare up with anger. "Though, Ardyn, I must now admit myself curious as to your unfortunate imprisonment."

"T'was my own brother's doing," Ardyn explained. "Somnus... he grew jealous of me and had me demonized and chained in order to deny me the throne that was mine by right."

"A familiar tale," Loki remarked, "as I'm certain good Hades would agree."

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," Hades said. "A tale as old as time: a golden boy brother becomes king, and his smarter, more handsome, and more capable brother gets left with bupkes."

"Is it indeed so familiar a tale?" Ardyn asked. "A dreadful cliché by my reckoning."

"Brothers are schmucks," Hades added with a shrug before wrapping his arm around Ardyn's shoulder and pulling him in close. "But, hey, that's why we've got the Overtakers. Lokes here basically already is my new rotten little brother, and, hey, the more the merrier. Whaddya say, Ardyn? Leave ol' Somnus behind in the past. Let us be your new brothers."

"Do I get no say in this?" Loki asked with a roll of his eyes.

"Zip it, horn-head," Hades said with a smirk.

"Oh I'd quite like that," Ardyn said. "Though let us hope that our poor luck with brothers is behind us. I should hate to have to destroy either of you."

"HA! The mortal has humor!" Loki replied. "Perhaps you could best Hades on a good day, but I think you'll find Loki, God of Evil, a far more difficult opponent."

"Uh, 'scuse me," Hades said. "Out of the three of us, who here has never been chained up and has never died?" Hades's hand shot into the air. "Whoops, just me. How about can say at least one of those two? Oh wait, still just me. Ooh, that's gotta sting. But, hey, there's always gotta be the weaker brothers to make the really powerful ones, like moi, look better, am I right?"

"Perhaps we should return our focus to the task at hand?" Ardyn suggested. "I fear Hades will cause
this room to overflow with hot air if he continues."
"I knew I liked you for good reason," Loki said with a laugh.

Whilst the others made their way to the edges of the city, Maleficent and Russell strolled deeper into the heart of Mistral, protected from the rain by a big black umbrella.

"Y'know, I think this is actually the first time you and I have spent any time together one on one," Russell remarked.

"I suppose there have been few opportunities for us to work as partners," Maleficent said. "I hope you do not take that as a reason to think that I hold you in contempt."

"Oh heavens no," Russell replied. "We're too old for that school girl bullshit. I only meant that we haven't really had an opportunity to get to know one another all that well."

"If you've a question, then you may ask," Maleficent said. "Whether or not I deign to answer remains to be seen."

"I was just wonderin'... aren't you a fairy?" Russell asked.

"Obviously, why?" Maleficent replied.

"Well, it's just that when we went to Avalon, it smelt like fuckin' Heaven," Russell said. "Even after Doom's operation, any time I got near a fairy, the smell was euphoric. But not around you. ... Not that you smell awful or anything like that. I'm just tryin' to figure out why that is. Was it because you were... y'know... banished from Avalon?"

Maleficent shook her head. "No. Think logically about this for a moment. The reason the blood of the fae is so pleasurable for a vampire is because of the light within the blood. It allows vampires to walk in the sun, after all. But not all fairies are of the light, are they?"

"Ohhh," Russell said, piecing it together. "So dark fairies don't have the same effect on vampires because we're both creatures of the darkness. Fascinatin'. But if it's all in the blood, I'm guessin' becomin' a dark fairy ain't exactly somethin' that you choose."

"You are correct," Maleficent nodded. "The dark fae, the Unseelie Court, are born the way we are. Our races have been at war for time immemorial, with our side longing to bring about the ultimate victory of darkness over light."

"Interestin'," Russell remarked. "So are your fellow dark fairies ever gonna help us out with our schemes?"

"Doubtful," Maleficent remarked bitterly. "My popularity with the factions within the Unseelie Court is not ideal. Many of them seek only darkness for darkness' sake. They do not appreciate ambition or a desire for more than single-minded wickedness. Not to mention, the petty squabbling and politics amongst factions grows more tiresome by the century."

Russell groaned. "Believe me, I can relate. Back home, if all the supernaturals would have just united together, we could've conquered humans easily. Yet they all just wanna fight and bicker amongst themselves whilst humans destroy our entire world. I wanted so badly to be the one to unite them all to save our planet, but now I just say fuck it all. Now that I know there are other worlds, who the fuck cares about saving a dying planet whose primary inhabitants are inferior morons actively destroying their own habitat?"
"It has been enlightening visiting so many worlds," Maleficent agreed. "I had not thought to find so many being poisoned by their own machinery."

"I can smell from the air that this world has hints of that same disease, but there's still gotta be quite a lot of untouched forest land," Russell remarked. "The air is so much cleaner here than back in Bon Temps. When we take over, we have GOT to do somethin' about all this crap."

"I shall leave you in charge of that directive," Maleficent stated.

As the two proceeded further down the street, Russell noticed an attractive young man checking him out. Russell smiled at the guy and gave him a once over. Russell wouldn't ever go behind Steve's back, but there was no harm in admiring a pretty face. Russell's thirst for blood caused his eyes to drift to the man's jugular, which he noticed had a spider-web tattooed over it, a sexy touch as far as Russell was concerned. However, as they proceeded further down the street, Russell started noticing more and more people with spider-web tattoos, and they all seemed to be keeping an eye on him and Maleficent.

"Don't draw too much attention to it when you look," Russell whispered. "But we've got some kind of gang spyin' on us."

"How can you tell?" Maleficent asked.

"They've all got spider-web tattoos," Russell answered. "It's a gang sign to clearly mark themselves to people in the know and to make a permanent contract on the skin. I used to do the same thing with my werewolf pack."

"Do you think they'll be a threat?" Maleficent asked.

"To us? No way," Russell said. "But it might behoove us to use them to find our missin' persons."

It didn't take Russell long to locate the hole-in-the-wall bar marked clearly with a spider-web pattern on its exterior. As the two Overtakers entered the seedy establishment, they immediately spotted a plump little woman sitting on a tuffet across the room being flanked by two armed guards. She was instantly recognizable as the leader of this establishment and thus was the one they approached.

"That's far enough," the woman said when Russell and Maleficent were a few feet away.

The two guards stepped in between the woman and the two Overtakers, making a threatening gesture that Russell found comical.

"Oh, come now, there's no need for that," Russell said.

"We simply wish to speak," Maleficent stated.

"Nobody speaks to Little Miss Malachite without paying in advance," one of the guards said.

Russell smirked. "Well that won't be happenin', but I suggest we do this the easy way."

The two guards drew their pistols.

"I think it's time you left," the second guard said.

Russell sighed and, in a blink of an eye, decapitated the two guards at vampiric speeds. Little Miss Malachite gasped in horror, prompting the rest of the bar to notice the grizzly sight. The gang members all drew their weapons and rushed to Little Miss Malachite's defense.
"One minute, m'lady," Russell said to Maleficent.

A speeding blur tore through the bar, weaving between tables and leaving utter carnage in its wake. Bodies and body parts dropped like flies, and within a few seconds, everyone in the bar aside from Little Miss Malachite and the two Overtakers were dead.


"Now then," Maleficent said with a much too cheerful air to her voice as she turned back to Malachite. "Perhaps you'll help me find the one I seek."

Cinder Fall smiled at the stolen airship that her ally, Neo, acquired for her. Salem may have left her in exile, but it wouldn't matter for much longer. Once vengeance on "Little Red" was hers, Cinder would be welcomed back at Salem's side like a hero. The power of all four Maidens would be hers to control, and the world would follow.

"Y'know Neo," Cinder began as they boarded the airship. "Someone once asked me if I believed in destiny, and I'm happy to say I still do."

The airship's hatch closed behind them, and the ship began to hover a little higher off the ground. However, before it could get too far off the ground, Cinder and Neo were knocked off their feet by a terrible lurch.

"What the Hell was that?" Cinder asked angrily.

Neo shrugged and shook her head to communicate that she didn't know. Cinder slammed the button to reopen the hatch and hopped out of the airship. The sight that greeted her took her off guard: Russell Edgington was leaning on the bow of the airship, holding it in place as if it were light as a feather. Russell gave Cinder a coy wave that incited a hot anger inside of her. However, before she could act upon that anger, she noticed the six other Overtakers approaching.

Maleficent walked ahead of the crowd, wearing a confident smile. "Cinder Fall, I presume. We have an... offer for you."

The axe-wielding brute cleaved one of the display cases clean in two with a furious roar. The patrons and employees of the Radiant Garden accessory shop ran screaming from the store in fear for their lives. Amora plucked a green and gold necklace from amidst the shattered glass and ran it through her fingers thoughtfully.

"The meager enchantments of this mortal jewelry are pathetic, Skurge," she remarked as she literally threw the necklace aside. "It's a wonder any of them survive a single battle."

"They art certainly quite weak compared to thy divine power and beauty," Skurge stated.

"Naturally," Amora agreed. "Few can truly compare to me. But hold! It appears we have company."

A blur raced into the damaged storefront and skidded to a stop in front of the Asgardians. Steve Newlin glared at them in as angry a face as he could muster. He was dressed in a hoodie, jeans, and a baseball cap to disguise himself from the everyday citizens of Radiant Garden for whom he was a household name.
"I know you're new, Enchantress, but-" Steve began before noticing Skurge. ". . . Who is that?"

"I am Skurge the Executioner, mortal!" he boasted. "And you shall not address my lady so candidly!"

"Now, now, Skurge, be polite," Amora replied with a mocking tone in her voice. "However royal or divine one may be, amongst the Overtakers, all are... oh what's the word those mortal believe? Ah yes. Equal."

Steve sighed at Amora's blatant mockery. "Look, I don't have a problem with you stealing or brutalizing people in your time off, but Radiant Garden is off limits. You're jeopardizing my long-term project every second you're here."

"Is that so?" Amora asked with disinterest.

"Yeah it is," Steve said, taking a threatening step towards Amora.

As Steve closed the gap between himself and the Enchantress, Skurge stepped in front of her brandishing his axe menacingly.

"That's far enough for a mortal worm like-"

But Skurge found himself tossed to the side at vampiric speeds, sending him tumbling over the shattered display case. Amora's eyes widened at Steve's display of force.

"Let me make myself perfectly fuckin' clear," Steve said with a serious tone. "My plans are too important and have cost me too much already to be destroyed by the likes of you. I may have a chipper and pleasant demeanor on TV, but you can bet your fucking life that I can be every bit as ruthless as any other Overtaker. Asgardians or no, if you ever pull a stunt like this again, you'll be joining Marluxia and his cronies in the next world."

Skurge picked himself up and prepared to charge at Steve, but he was halted by a gesture from Amora.

"No, my Executioner, this is not a fight worth picking," she said. "Come. We've other matters to attend to."

With a wave of Amora's hand, she and Skurge teleported themselves away from the jewelry store. Steve sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose. Ever since Maleficent started focusing all her attention on the Gems of Cronus, Steve had basically been forced to returned to his role of playing baby-sitter for the remaining Overtakers. He swore to himself that once the Radiant Garden plan was done, he'd just leave the Overtakers to selfimplode if that's what it took. The wayward nuisances could be someone else's problem.

Steve's ears perked up when he heard the familiar sound of a Corridor of Darkness taking form behind him. Steve didn't have to turn around to know who had just teleported into the jewelry store.

"You have even less reason to be seen in public than Amora does," Steve remarked, "let alone in public with ME!"

"As if I need you to tell me what to do," Xigbar replied with a scoff.

"Is there a reason you're jeopardizing everything by being here, because there really needs to be a reason," Steve said as he turned to face his companion, growing even more annoyed with the situation.
"Couldn't exactly have shown up at your office in Villain's Vale, now could I?" Xigbar remarked. "Figured this would be the least conspicuous way to get in touch with you."

"Did you get what I asked for?" Steve asked.

Xigbar held up a flash drive dramatically and twiddled it between his fingers. "Got it right here! Cid and Lenzo may be some smart cookies, but in their efforts to preserve the DTD, they never purged my login from the server. Guess they figured there wasn't anything on there that I'd ever be interested in... which, I mean, they were right about. Not much I could do with anything there. But for you...."

Steve's frustration completely melted away into utter glee. "Were you able to access all the schematics for Operation Repose? I can make due with whatever you got, but more is better."

Xigbar laughed loudly at that. "Kid, call me Santa Claus, because I got you more than schematics on here. This little drive holds the key to unrestricted remote control of Operation Repose."

Xigbar handed the drive over to Steve who clutched it firmly in his hands.

"If this drive isn't what you say it is, our deal is forfeit," Steve reminded him.

"You're so suspicious; it's really not cute," Xigbar said with an indignant scoff.

"You betrayed Xehanort, every ally you ever had, and now Cronus himself," Steve said. "Forgive me for not finding you especially trustworthy."

"Can't argue with that," Xigbar said with a shrug. "But it's all there. I've got my own reasons for wanting you to take control of Operation Repose, same as you had your own reasons to want Marluxia and his flunkies dead."

"And what are those reasons?" Steve asked.

Xigbar merely smirked. "As if I'm actually gonna tell you that."

As Xigbar vanished back into the darkness, a lone fly departed the jewelry store to report all that it had heard back to its master.

The two guards stationed outside of the Underworld cell didn't know what hit them. As Daken sliced the first demon into ribbons, Jafar transfigured the second beast into a helpless insect that Grimhilde crunched beneath her heels. Jafar approached the locked door and unleashed a blast of energy to knock it down. His magic ricocheted off it harmlessly.

"Magic resistance," Jafar hissed. "I should have guessed."

"That is why we have brought with us a more conventional burglar," Grimhilde pointed out. Demyx slumped grouchily towards the door, muttering something about how much he hated having to do work. With a crude pair of pins, he got to work picking the lock.

"I can smell Hook on the other side," Daken said. "His distinctly masculine odor coupled with unwashed leather is hard to miss."

"Is he alright?" Jafar caught himself asking before he could think better of it.

"Yeah, heart's still beating," Daken said. "Though, not going to lie, I can smell a lot of blood even out here. He won't be doing too well."
Grimhilde laid a sympathetic hand on Jafar's shoulders. As much as Jafar loathed to appear in need of sympathy, he appreciated the gesture.

"I will be able to heal him with my potions," she said. "All will be well."

"Got it!" Demyx announced as the lock clicked open.

Jafar practically threw Demyx to the side to get into the room. Hook was inside, chained to the far wall. He seemed to be asleep or otherwise unconscious, and both dried and still wet blood decorated his skin like war paint. Jafar rushed over to him at once, and knelt down in front of his lover.

"Hook, wake up," Jafar said as he shook the pirate.

Hook did not rouse.

"Wake up you, IMBECILE!" Jafar hissed angrily.

This time, Hook blinked awake slowly. He strained to lift his head to face Jafar, and when he gazed upon his lover's face, he seemed confused.

"What are... what are you doing here?" Hook strained to ask through a cracking voice.

"I'm rescuing you, what else?" Jafar said with a roll his eyes.

Jafar sent a stream of red sparks from his fingertips that caused the chains to release Hook. When his hands untied, Hook collapsed like a stone to the floor. Jafar struggled to lift Hook up and sit him up straight.

"We must hurry!" Grimhilde informed them. "It will not be long before one of Cronus's allies comes for us. We'll be able to use a Corridor to escape once we leave this room."

Hook looked over at who Jafar brought with him and blinked dramatically to focus his vision. His eyes widened in terror at the sight of one of the companions.

"No!" Hook said, pointing in the general direction of the other three Overtakers. "No, no, no, no! Why did you bring HIM? He's a traitor! He's the reason I'm here!"

Jafar's eyes flashed with rage. He released Hook (causing the poor disoriented pirate to slump back to the ground) and stormed over to his alleged allies. In Jafar's mind, there was only one person it could be: the very person that interjected himself into the mission in the first place.

"YOU!" Jafar shouted as he grabbed Daken by the shirt collar. "YOU'RE THE CAUSE OF THIS!"

"Hey, hey, don't wrinkle my outfit, it's designer!" Daken said. "And I didn't betray you!"

"You expect me to believe that?" Jafar hissed. "We all know what sorts of treachery you engaged with during Steve Newlin's tenure as the head Overtaker. He may have allowed such blatant backstabbing, but I am not so forgiving! Mark my words, you will learn that there are things so much worse than death!"

"It wasn't fucking me," Daken spat. "Now let me go, or I will give my claws a tour of your esophagus!"

"Enough of your lies!" Jafar roared.
"Actually," Demyx chimed in, drawing the attention of the other three Overtakers. "He's not lying."

Demyx blinked and his teal blue eyes turned a vibrant shade of yellow.

"You?" Jafar asked in disbelief as he released Daken.

"You really didn't expect one of Xehanort's vessels to betray you?" Demyx asked. "You really thought that someone as weak as *Fish Mooney* could just banish Xehanort's heart from this body? For a bunch of supposed evil masterminds, you really are a bunch of fools."

Jafar prepared to attack, but Grimhilde held him back. Attacking an unknown variable connected to be Xehanort could be a fatal mistake, and they needed to gauge their opponent before engaging.

"So are you Demyx or are you Xehanort?" Grimhilde asked.

Demyx smirked. "I'm actually not quite either one. You see the spell that Master Xehanort used to create thirteen vessels essentially opened all thirteen of us to each other. We were all supposed to become versions of *him*. With Master Xehanort himself dead, that process was interrupted but the connection between the vessels remained. So the strongest surviving manifestation of Xehanort's heart took over the connection."

"Xigbar?" Grimhilde asked.

"Xigbar is running around free already," Demyx said with a sigh. "He wouldn't have any reason to do this. No, there's one other Xehanort you forgot about. You can trap a body in time, but one who has sacrificed their physical form can move *freely* through time, even when their prison is a prison free of time itself."

Demyx began to hover off the ground, his cloak billowing at the base. He crossed his arms and leaned his head back as he smiled confidently.

"You see, it is I, Ansem. The seeker of darkness!"

Chapter End Notes

Little Miss Malachite, Cinder Fall, and Neo are from RWBY.

Skurge the Executioner is from Marvel comics.
"Winnie! Winnie!" Mary shouted as she ran into the crooked little cottage on the outskirts of Twilight Town that the Sanderson Sisters had inhabited for the past month.

Winnie, who had been carefully measuring the exact amount of Oil of Boil needed for her potion, had her concentration broken and dropped the vial of oil to the ground. The red haired witch growled under her breath at the mess.

"MARY! Look at what thou hast made me do!" Winnie hissed angrily.

"Oh, sorry, sorry," Mary apologized weakly. "I'll mop it up. I'm sorry."

As Mary waddled over to collect the mop and bucket, Sarah skipped merrily down the stairs, twirling her skirt around as she did.

"Didst another child throw a stone through our windows?" Sarah asked.

"No, Mary just caused me to drop my potion ingredient with her incessant shouting," Winnie explained.

"But Winnie," Mary said as she set to work mopping up the spillage. "I wanted to say-"

"Up-bup-bup!" Winnie interrupted. "I'll not have a conversation with thee until thy work is complete!"

"But Winnie!" Mary pleaded.

"NO BUTS!" Winnie shouted, silencing her sister.

"Behold!" Sarah said, pointing out the window. "Yonder town hast changed its colors!"

"What?!" Winnie asked as she peered out. "Oh my! Why, Twilight Town is returning to the way it was before Mozenrath! The heroes must have defeated him! ... MARY! Why did thou not tellest me IMMEDIATELY?"

"But Winnie I- ... Er, I mean, yes, Winnie, I'm sorry, Winnie," Mary said.

"We must inform Maleficent at once!" Winnie declared. "COME! WE FLY!"

The stolen airship deposited the seven Overtakers amidst the burgundy stones and deep black pools that looked like tar pits at first glance. A castle rose in the distance, but the Overtakers were careful to mask their presence from the castle's occupants. This realm of the Lord of Darkness was somehow simultaneously repulsive and enticing the Overtakers. Its power was tangible, yet the threat it posed was even more so.

"These are the coordinates Ms. Fall programmed into my scanners," Doom announced. "It seems she spoke truthfully."

"Pity she couldn't come with us," Cruella bemoaned. "I quite liked her sense of style, and it would have been nice to have another woman around to talk to. Men can be so boring after a point."

"A fool's sentiment," Doom hissed, silencing Cruella.
"The gem will be sealed in fire," Maleficent said, drawing the attention of her allies. "Perhaps a temple or- Hmm? What are you doing, Hades?"

Hades was crouched down on the ground, pressing his hand against the rocks. He appeared to be concentrating on something. Few had ever seen Hades's brow furrowed so.

"Can't you guys feel that?" Hades asked. "The heat?"

"I suppose it is a bit warm here," Russell said as he shed his jacket and tied it around his waist.

"Not like that," Hades said, pointing to the black pool of water a few feet away. "There's a hydrothermal vent beneath the dark lake. And where there's a vent-"

"A volcano will be nearby," Doom finished. "That would certainly qualify for the hiding place of a gemstone of fire."

"Bingo," Hades said.

"Shall we split up to cover more ground?" Ardyn suggested. "A volcano could be any one of these mountains."

"No need," Loki said.

Loki waved his hand through Hades's hair and stole a flicker of flames that danced in the palm of his hand. Loki whispered a spell under his breath and blew the flames off his hand. The little streak of fire tore through the air towards one of the mountains, leaving a trail of green smoke in its wake.

"A simple locator spell," Loki explained. "After all, if the gem is sealed behind a barrier that only Hades can open, then a little bit of Hades's fire should seek out the corresponding enchantments."

"Follow the trail," Maleficent ordered as she turned into an orb of green light and flew along the path left behind.

Cruella shook her head in confusion. "Does she realize that we can't follow her that way?"

"She never seems to," Loki replied with a sigh.

The remaining Overtakers found their own ways to follow after Maleficent. Russell, capable of flight through his own powers flew after her. Doom used the jet propulsions in his boots to take off with Loki holding onto him tightly. Hades, meanwhile, loaded Ardyn and Cruella into his chariot, and whipped the dragon-like demon into motion. Maleficent had a substantial lead on her companions, but the other six remained in relatively close formation as they flew.

"Doom said something funny to me earlier," Cruella said to her chariot mates to break the silence. "He said I was a useless waste of space to the Overtakers. Do you believe that?"

"Oy vey, babe, c'mon, this is Doctor Doom we're talkin' about here," Hades replied. "He's a regular Uranus if ya catch my drift."

"Oh indeed so," Ardyn remarked. "He doesn't see what a lovely dynamic you bring to our team. He only sees allies in terms of their practical value."

"You mean to say I have no practical value?" Cruella asked, her concerns suddenly growing worse.

"I know it's ironic having me tell you this, but chill out!" Hades said. "Malef wouldn't've put you on the Overtakers if she didn't think you had value. Doomy ain't team captain; she is. And Malef trusts
you enough to let you in on this mission, so, hey, she obviously thinks you're a loyal cast member of this organization."

Hades's words, however, did not comfort Cruella. Doom's words from earlier rang in her ears: *loyalty should never be mistaken for usefulness.* What could Cruella even offer this team that they would appreciate? For that matter, how long would it take for them to grow sick of her and just trim the fat? Cruella didn't want to think about where she'd end up if that ever came to pass.

Cruella's line of thinking was interrupted by something black swooping down to Russell. The vampire, being quicker than most, was able to swiftly grab the attacking creature and hurl it to the ground. The others were not so fortunate. A swarm of flying monkey-like creatures descended upon the Overtakers. Three of the beasts latched onto Hades's chariot and began chewing on the reigns and tires. These were the notorious Creatures of Grimm that terrorized this world.

"WHERE THE BLAZES DID THESE THINGS COME FROM?" Hades growled as he hurled fire balls at the monkey-like Grimm.

At that moment, a Grimm rammed itself into Doom and Loki, causing Doom to spiral off course and drop Loki. Loki vanished mid-fall, teleporting himself away. Cruella felt the chariot lurch as Loki reappeared, holding onto the chariot's wheel as he kicked a Grimm away. Doom attempted to blast the Grimm out of the sky, but four converged on him and tackled Doom. Ardyn hopped out of the chariot and hovered in mid-air, being held up by the vibrant pink blades of the royal arms. Ardyn was hurling energy blades throughout the air at the Grimm as quickly as he could, but for as many as he destroyed, more emerged to continue the attack.

Cruella saw a Grimm diving right towards her, and she felt as though her heart would stop. Her first instinct was to duck, but she knew she'd never be able to get down fast enough to avoid the creature's vicious claws. Cruella had only one hope. She didn't know if the Grimm were animal enough for her powers to control, but she had to try. Cruella exhaled a cloud of green smoke and shielded her face, preparing for the worst.

When no vicious claws came, Cruella opened her eyes to see the Grimm that had attacked her hovering in front of her, awaiting her command. Cruella smiled. Her magic would work after all. Before Cruella could give the Grimm instructions, Hades incinerated the beast with a fire blast. As Cruella looked around her, dread filled her stomach. The skies were filled with more Grimm than she could control. Her one contribution wouldn't suffice. Unless....

"LOKI!" Cruella called out. "I NEED YOU!"

Loki froze a Grimm flying towards him and struggled to shake another one off his leg.

"I'm a little busy at the moment!" Loki called up after her.

"I NEED YOU NOW! " Cruella shouted down.

Loki sighed and let go of the chariot's tire. Both he and the Grimm attached to his leg fell like a stone. As the beast thrashed at him, Loki managed to maneuver himself onto the creature's back and stabbed two daggers into the Grimm's shoulder blades. The beast shriek in pain, but Loki dug his daggers in deeper, causing the Grimm to fly straight up. Cruella watched as the Grimm carried Loki higher and higher until Loki slit the beast's throat. As the Grimm he was riding dissolved into mist, Loki vanished and reappeared in the chariot next to Cruella.

"What is it?" Loki asked.
"My magic can stop these wretched beasts," Cruella explained. "I can control them, but I'm not powerful enough to get them all by myself. I need you to amplify my magic."

"Are you mad?" Loki asked. "That much godly power in a mortal woman? You could-"

"JUST DO IT!" Cruella ordered.

Loki saw that there was no sense in arguing and clutched Cruella's shoulder. He poured his magic into her body, causing her to radiate a blinding shade of green. Cruella clenched her jaw so tightly that she felt as though she would crack a tooth. The energy coursing through her veins was far more than any mortal could handle. But Cruella was no mere mortal, she reminded herself. She was a Queen of Darkness, fabulous and fearless. The worlds bent the knee as she walked by. She could never forget that. Never would forget that.

With an ear-piercing battle cry, Cruella released the energy. A green ring of magic radiated out from Cruella, passing through every single Grimm in the sky. As the magic touched them, the Grimm became docile and calm, awaiting their mistress's instructions. After touching the last Grimm, the ring vanished into the atmosphere. Cruella felt her entire body go weak, but she had to hold on a little while longer.

"GO!" she ordered the Grimm. "Leave us alone!"

The Grimm obeyed and flew out of sight at once. As Cruella watched them leave, she smiled at how badly she'd just proven Doctor Doom wrong. She wasn't useless after all. Cruella smiled smugly as the light-headedness came over her and everything went black.

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The Gummi ship landed on the launchpad in Radiant Garden. Leon, Cid, and Aeleus stood there waiting, accompanied by several armed City Watchmen. Sora, Donald, and Goofy came running down the gang plank first to give hugs out to everyone.

"LEON!" the trio shouted as they attached themselves to the brunette man.

"It's good to see you," Leon said as he struggled to pry the trio off of him.

"It's been a shit show since y'all were here last," Cid grunted.

"Huh?" Sora asked. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind for now," Leon said. "We'll talk later. You have the prisoners you told us about?"

Sora nodded and called for his companions. Riku, Ghost Rider, and Thor exited the Gummi ship, escorting Hecate, Miratrix, and Morgana off of the ship. None of the villainesses were looking particularly pleased with this turn of events.

"Everybody else is helping to clean up Twilight Town," Sora explained. "Mozenrath and a few of his allies got away, but we got the most powerful ones."

"My anti-magic cuffs workin' fine?" Cid asked.

"Indeed," Thor chimed in. "I am most impressed, mortal, by your science's ability to subdue a goddess of sorcery. Though perhaps the goddess's powers are a bit overstated."

Thor gave a boisterous laugh as he clapped a very annoyed looking Hecate on the back. Aeleus led the City Watchmen in taking over the task of escorting Mozenrath's allies to the super-max prison.
"So, uh, what did you mean before about Radiant Garden?" Sora asked.

"What's all this then?" a deep voice bellowed.

"That," Leon sighed.

Kingpin strolled over to where the heroes were gathered, a crowd of onlookers following him. At the head of them all were none other than Steve Newlin and his camera man recording the entire thing.

"This is a fuckin' prisoner transfer, so y'all need to stay the fuck back!" Cid shouted.

"More prisoners to be locked away in your super-max prison without trial?" Kingpin asked, posturing mock outrage for the crowd's purpose. "And what have these individuals done?"

"We stopped them from turning Twilight Town into Darkness Town!" Sora said, not fully grasping that he was being set up.

"More foreign prisoners being imported into our fair city?" Kingpin asked. "Ladies and gentlemen, is this what we the people want?"

"NO!" the crowd chorused.

"They're bad guys!" Sora shouted at the crowd. "They have to go to jail!"

"Young man, you are childish naively on such matters," Kingpin said. "Mark my words, no good will come from the Restoration Committee's blatant disregard for our welfare. Once I am elected prime minister, all of that will change!"

The crowd broke out into thunderous cheering.

"The Restoration Committee is doing what's right!" Sora shouted over the noise.

"Sora, come on," Riku said as he put a hand on Sora's shoulder. "You can't win a shouting match with those people. We need to go."

Sora reluctantly allowed himself to be swept away from the crowd as Kingpin began to give a long and verbose speech about the Restoration Committee's myriad of flaws.

"What was THAT about?" Sora asked Leon once they were out of earshot.

"Steve Newlin's been making things worse for us," Leon answered. "He forced us into holding an election for Prime Minister. We think he's using it to get that man who was leading the crowds, Wilson Fisk, into office on Maleficent's behalf."

"That's crazy!" Sora said. "Why don't you guys arrest them?"

"Because they haven't done anything wrong," Leon said. "Just because they work for Maleficent doesn't mean we can just lock them up. They're only talking right now. Unfortunately, them talking is causing a lot of problems. We're hoping the rhetoric will calm down after the election."

"Fat fuckin' chance," Cid huffed.

"What's an election?" Sora asked.

"Oh brother," Donald said with a roll of his eyes.
"Fisk and Ienzo are running against each other for the office of Prime Minister," Leon explained. "The people of Radiant Garden get to choose who they want to be in charge later this week."

"Oh, well that's good!" Sora said, smiling. "Ienzo's definitely gonna win! The people of Radiant Garden love him, and they'll know a good guy when they see one."

"I hope you're right, Sora," Leon said, though he didn't sound at all convinced.

Cruella blinked her eyes open as she regained consciousness. There was a distinct iron taste in her mouth and her lips were wet. Cruella rubbed her fingers over the moisture, and they came up stained red with blood.

"Sorry, that's mine," Russell said as he helped sit her up straight. "Vampire blood is good for healin'."

"Which I helped with," Ardyn boasted as he walked over. "I've quite the considerable experience healing supernatural maladies."

"You feelin' alright?" Russell asked.

"Fine, darling, just... tired," Cruella admitted. "And... really wishing that I wasn't sober right now."

"Yep, she's fine," Russell affirmed with a laugh.

"Where are the others?" Cruella asked once she noticed that it was only the three of them.

Ardyn gestured to a cave a few yards away. "Seeking the gemstone deep within the volcano."

Meanwhile, down in the cave, Maleficent, Hades, Loki, and Doctor Doom arrived in a large chamber with a ceiling far taller than the previous tunnel. The cave opened into a great volcanic lake whose surface billowed with purple flames.

"This has gotta be it," Hades said.

"A lake of fire, of course!" Maleficent remarked. "Quite a powerful enchantment to protect the gem."

"Doctor Facilier said that the gem was hidden between 'ticks of the clock,' whatever that means," Hades recounted.

"Then we'll need to stop time to retrieve it," Doom said. "Allow me."

Doom activate the time machine in his armor, causing a cube of temporal energy to expand outward. However, as it touched the flames, the energy began to twist and blew back on Doom, sending the doctor flying backwards into the wall. Loki couldn't help but laugh.

"Your mortal science is truly extraordinary, Victor," Loki said.

"Shut up, Loki," Doom spat as he pulled himself to his feet.

"The magic concealing the gem was meant for Hades," Maleficent explained. "And Hades alone will be able to retrieve it. I doubt any of us, with all our magic would be able to cross the flames."

"Yeah, yeah, I get the picture," Hades said as he stepped towards the flaming lake. "Guess it's show time."
Hades snapped his fingers and his billowy robes vanished into wisps of smoke, leaving behind only a pair of swimming trunks with little skulls on them.

"Hope my fire insurance is all paid up," Hades said as he dove into the purple flames, vanishing from sight.

For several minutes, the three Overtakers stared into the flames, not knowing anything about their companion's fate or current status. All was quiet with only the crackling of the flames making any noise.

"So, care to play twenty questions?" Loki asked.

Maleficent and Doom just stared at him in disbelief at the suggestion. Loki, not caring that their answer was clearly no, simply shrugged.

"I'll start," Loki announced. "I'm thinking of a plant."

"It's mistletoe," Doom answered.

Loki glared at his lover. "I loathe you sometimes."

"Behold!" Maleficent said, gesturing out towards the lake of fire.

A column of blue fire erupted in the center of the lake. The fire near the flaming tower began to take on a blue hue as well, and soon the effect spread to encompass the entire lake. The blue flames roared, and with one great motion swept aside and vanished into thin air. The fire must have evaporated the lake as well, because all that was left was a large basin where the lake had once been. Hades stood in the center of the crater next to an altar of some sort. He gave a little wave and beckoned for his companions to join him.

"It was Phlegethon water," Hades explained, "comes from one of the rivers of my domain. Doesn't burn its boss. How water from Tartarus got all the way here I've got no clue, but *this* is definitely what it was guarding."

Hades patted the stone altar protruding from the ground. It appeared to be an ordinary stone column, but it was the only thing left in the place of what was once was a lake of Phlegethon water. That fact made it important. Hieroglyphics were etched onto the surface. Though foreign and strange to Loki, through his mastery of the All-Speak, the text depicted on the altar was as clear to him as if it were written in perfect English.

"Flaming waters were but the first," Loki read aloud, "but next to conquer is an ugly curse, the gem meant for the Underworld lord, gained only the second he adds to his hoard."

As Loki finished reading the inscription, Doom immediately leapt backwards and activated his armor's weaponry systems.

"Whoa, whoa, Doomy, what the heck?" Hades asked.

"You'll not sacrifice me!" Doom hissed. "My mortality will not be the plaything of the gods!"

"Lokes, I think your boyfriend has lost it," Hades said with a confused tone.

Loki, however, shook his head. "Have you not yet deciphered the instructions? Facilier told you that the gem existed between ticks of the clock. Don't you see? It's not about stopping time. It'll only manifest at the time of a death, a sacrifice made on this altar to bolster your hoard of souls in the
Underworld.

"And as the only human in a room of immortals, I know what straw I've drawn," Doom growled.

"Hey, c'mon, I'm not killing any of you," Hades said. "That's crazy talk; it's meshuga."

"Are you certain?" Maleficent asked. "To obtain the gem, a sacrifice must be made. I did not come all this way to return home empty handed."

"If you wish to sacrifice my life, I will make you bleed for it," Doom threatened.

"Oh Victor, stop with the theatrics," Loki said. "We have three perfectly good mortals waiting right outside the cave."

"Two mortals," Doom corrected. "As an undead vampire, Russell would not suffice."

"One mortal," Maleficent corrected. "Ardyn was resurrected by Hades. His soul already belongs to the Underworld even though he walks as if he were alive. His death would not add to Hades's hoard."

"Then we have our answer," Loki said plainly. "I am thankful Cruella served us in dealing with the Grimm, but now she'll serve us in death. Perhaps we can resurrect her if need be?"

"Doubtful," Doom said. "You know the costs of ritual as well as I, Loki. Her soul will need to be forfeit beyond simple resurrection."

Loki shrugged. "Oh well then."

"Wait a minute, hold on a sec," Hades said. "Why are we talkin' about sacrificing our people? Why don't we just pop over to the nearest town, grab some Joe Blow or Mary Ordinary, and kill them instead?"

"The magics of this land blocks the Corridors of Darkness," Maleficent said. "We would have to leave by airship and return the same way, a trip that would at the very least cost us half a day. Cronus's flunkies could be here by then. With the Phlegethon waters dispelled, there's nothing to stop them from making a sacrifice and claiming the gem for their own."

"Maybe there's someone in that castle nearby?" Hades suggested hopefully. "One of Cinder's old allies. We can kill them, no problem. Russell could be in and out in a few minutes."

"And what if there's no one there, or worse, someone more powerful than us?" Loki asked. "We know very little about Cinder's allies, and they could cause more problems than they're worth."

"We're running low on time," Doom said. "We need to choose."

"I am NOT sacrificing one of our teammates," Hades said, putting his foot down. "Worst case scenario we leave without the gem. Ya got the concept?"

"That is not your call to make," Maleficent warned.

"It's my dad's gemstone, my sacrifice, my plan in the first place," Hades said. "I love ya, babe, but this is MY call this time."

Before Maleficent had a chance to argue, Russell dashed into the room at vampiric speeds and skidded to a halt in front of the arguing quartet.
"We've got a problem," Russell announced.

The five Overtakers exited the cave to find Ardyn and Cruella standing with their weapons drawn and pointed at the three people standing in front of them. Loki and Doom suppressed a groan at the sight of Morgan le Fay, and Peter Pan's smug smirk infuriated Hades. The man standing in the center of the trio, however, surprised everyone present.

"Demyx?" Maleficent asked. "What in the world do you think you're doing?"

Demyx just laughed and shook his head.

"No, not Demyx," he said before putting on an air of mock sympathy. "Do you need some help?"

Maleficent's blood ran cold and her fury intensified. She remembered all too well where she heard that same phrase uttered with that same inflection. It was practically etched into her mind considering that it was one of the last things she'd heard before she died.

"Ansem," Maleficent hissed through a quivering voice.

"Indeed," Demyx nodded. "It appears some of your allies aren't particularly talented at disposing of their enemies."

Demyx shot a knowing glance at Doctor Doom.

"What is the meaning of this?" Maleficent asked.

"Simple," Demyx replied. "You are going to hand over the Gem of Cronus."

Maleficent squinted her eyes as she glared at her enemy. "And why would I ever do a fool thing like that?"

Demyx chuckled and snapped his fingers. Four purple coffins made of pure energy appeared behind the allies of Cronus. Cruella gasped when she saw what the coffins contained: the unconscious bodies of Grimhilde, Jafar, Daken, and Hook.

"Because we have your allies."
Steve Newlin strolled down the empty streets of the Overtaken Kingdom. The eternal night that hung over the city was a comfort to the vampire. Though he had the ability to walk in the sun, Steve felt so much more comfortable wrapped in the darkness of the night. The dark city was almost comical to Steve. Despite the city lights and neon, not a soul lived in this world apart from the Overtakers. They ruled an empty city, an illusion of power.

"Out for an evening walk?" Imperious asked as he intruded upon Steve's solitude. "I so rarely see you away from Villain's Vale these days."

"My work in Radiant Garden makes the Vale base far more convenient," Steve explained. "But it's nice to clear my head here where it's quiet and I can be alone to plan."

"It surprises me that you so enjoy being alone, Newlin," imperious remarked. "You see to be quite the social butterfly on television."

"Well looks can be deceiving," Steve said as he began to walk away. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Yes, yes, not fond of my company, I take it?" Imperious asked. "I'm sure you'd far prefer the company of a certain ally of Cronus, wouldn't you?"

Steve stopped in his tracks, and his undead heart skipped a beat at Imperious's insinuation. Steve was certain he'd be very careful in covering his tracks with Xigbar, but what if he hadn't?

"Well I guess even an ally of Cronus would be more trustworthy than you," Steve replied, playing dumb. "At least with one of them, I'd know they were my enemy."

"But are they all?" Imperious asked coyly.

"Whatever you're implying, just go right ahead and say it," Steve said. "I don't have time for whatever this is."

Imperious twirled his fan around in his hand, and sprawled out across the leaf of the fan was an image of Steve's meeting with Xigbar in the jewelry shop the other day. Steve had no idea how Imperious had come to possess this image, but his blood ran cold at the implications. Steve had only made his deal with Xigbar for the furtherance of the plans to overtake Radiant Garden, but the way it would look to Maleficent would be less than ideal.

"And don't insult my intelligent by playing the fool," Imperious warned. "I am a patient man, but I have my limits."

"What do you want?" Steve asked with a sigh, knowing that Imperious intended to extort something from him.
Imperious let out a laugh that was much too loud. "All in good time, my good man. For now, let's just say you belong to me!"

"No deal," Steve said.

"Too bad," Imperious sighed. "Russell already lost one lover. Losing two will positively break his heart."

Steve sighed. Imperious had him there. Russell deserved better than that.

"God dammit," Steve cursed. "Fine. I'm yours."

"SPLENDID!" Imperious declared with a cackle.

Best to let Imperious have the upper hand for now, Steve figured. After all, Imperious wasn't the only one with resources, and Steve had no intentions of being kept under Imperious's thumb for long.

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Seven Overtakers. Three allies of Cronus. Four Overtakers being held hostage. Maleficent had the numbers on her side, and she was confident in her allies' abilities. Ansem and Morgan le Fay, she knew to be powerful, and Peter Pan's gruesome reputation preceded him. However, Maleficent had two gods on her side, as well as two sorcerers used to battling against gods, an ancient vampire, and a witch with an entire flock of Grimm at her command. The balance of power was tipped in the Overtakers' favor. It was the hostages that gave Maleficent pause. Ansem was a shrewd and crafty devil. He'd have taken every precaution to ensure that her hostage allies would die if she did not comply.

On one hand, Maleficent could just sacrifice the hostages. They were, after all, weak enough to get themselves captured in the first place. The Overtakers were villains, not heroes. There was absolutely no expectation for anyone to value anyone else's life over the acquisition of a goal. And yet, if Maleficent sacrificed these four for the sake of her ambitions, she knew it would shatter the peace and cooperation of her faction. There would be blood in the water, and her allies would swarm. That was to say nothing of the fact that, aside from Daken, she had to admit that she was rather fond of the hostages. Grimhilde had become a dear friend, Jafar was one of her longest surviving allies, and Hook had proven himself an enthusiastic and loyal associate despite his lower rank.

However, complying with Demyx-Ansem's demand to hand over the Gem of Cronus was not viable. The Overtakers themselves had not yet obtained that artifact, and if Demyx-Ansem knew that it was only a blood sacrifice away, he would kill one of her Overtakers to obtain the gem anyway. Defying him wasn't an option, and a tactical surrender wasn't an option. Maleficent felt well and truly outmatched. For once, she didn't know what to do.

"Yes, well, your arrival was not well timed," Loki said, his voice startling Maleficent out of her uncertainty. "We've not yet acquired the Gem of Cronus, and thus cannot provide it to you."

Maleficent looked at Loki in disbelief. He met her gaze with a look that conveyed a simple message: trust me.

"He is Loki the Liesmith," Morgan le Fay said with a haughty scoff. "We cannot trust a word that comes out of his mouth."

"Never-the-less, it is the truth," Doom chimed in. "You know me well, Morgan. Doom is many things, but a liar is not one."

Morgan squinted at Doom as if trying to decide whether or not to murder him on the spot. However,
she seemed to think better of it and shook her head.

"Then retrieve them gem, we will be here waiting with your allies until you return," Morgan ordered.

"And what makes you think we care about our allies?" Loki asked. "We're not some foolhardy band of heroes who believe that the insignificant lives of others have any value."

"We are NOT leaving Grimhilde to the beasts!" Cruella spat angrily, not picking up on Loki's intentions.

"Aww, look at that, Cruella De Vil has a heart after all," Peter Pan teased. "Cruella and the Evil Queen sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Cruella sneered. "I *would* say that you've just reminded me why I loathe children, but that hardly seems appropriate when you're a good two centuries older than I am. Tell me, darling, how badly do you miss getting into bars and having armpit hair?"

"We all make sacrifices in pursuit of what we really want, as I'm sure your liver can attest," Pan replied with a smug smirk.

"At any rate," Loki said through gritted teeth, "the ritual to obtain the gemstone is a bit complex. Time magic beyond that which any of us are capable of protects it. Perhaps if one such as you, Morgan, were to attempt the feat."

Morgan threw her head back and laughed. "Do you think me a fool, trickster? Did you think I would walk blindly into whatever trap you've laid for me? No. Morgan le Fay is far too cunning for that!"

"Then we are at a stalemate," Loki said with a shrug. "We cannot provide the boon you seek, and thus you will not release our allies."

"Then their lives will be forfeit," Pan hissed. "We already established the rules of this game."

"But did you think them through?" Loki asked. "You're holding hostages that cannot get you what you desire. Yet if you kill them, we simply cannot allow you to do that with impunity. Therefore *your* lives are forfeit."

"You think you can kill us? HA!" Morgan replied.

"I do," Loki said confidently. "Three of you. Seven of us. I quite like our odds. We kill you. Cronus gets nothing, and so he either leaves you dead or resurrects you to torment. Meanwhile, we live on as powerful as ever, and perhaps we even find the means to resurrect our allies. After all, Jafar and Grimhilde know secrets of the darkness. Keeping them down will be a challenge. So I ask you to reconsider your situation."

Maleficent had to admit herself impressed by Loki. Though she wasn't certain how well it would pay off, she knew he'd just successfully asserted the power of the Overtakers against their enemies through words alone. There was a reason he was so valuable.

Demyx-Ansem chuckled at Loki's assessment. "A clever observation from a clever man. But if numbers won battles, the mathematicians would rule the world. And you've also overlooked one simple fact."

"And that would be?" Loki replied.

"Without the Gem of Cronus, you have no bargaining chip," Demyx-Ansem replied. "And thus, *we*
Doom immediately activated his time cube, attempting to freeze time over Cronus's three allies and leave the Overtakers free to move. However, Morgan le Fay was too quick for him, and her time spell collided with his technology. Loki attempted to counter the spell, but the three energies spun together wildly. With the chronal device damaged by Doom's earlier attempts to use it on the Phlegethon water, the cube fluctuated wildly and swept Doom, Loki, and Morgan away into a pocket between time.

Peter Pan carved out a section of the battlefield for himself as shadowy walls separated them from the other fighters. Pan grinned deviously as he looked up the face of Cruella De Vil, Russell Edgington, and Ardyn Izunia. However, when Pan saw the confident look on Cruella's face, he found it a bit troublesome. It was as if she knew something that he didn't. His question was answered for him momentarily as he heard the flutter of wings above him. The flock of flying monkey Grimm was heading towards them to aid their new master in battle.

"How adorable," Pan remarked. "You've brought some creatures of darkness to do your bidding. Can my dark creature come out to play too?"

Cruella looked confused until she saw Pan's shadow peel itself away from its master and fly off into the swarm. Pan's shadow, despite being outnumbered, started slaughtering Grimm left and right as if they were nothing but toys for him to break.

"Now then, let's have a little fun, shall we?" Pan asked with a sinister smile on his lips.

"I am nearly three thousand years old," Russell warned. "You won't find a vampire more powerful than me. Last chance to surrender before I rip your fuckin' head off."

"Give it your best shot," Pan said, goading his opponent on.

Russell dashed forward at vampiric speeds, intent on making good on his threats.

"Stopga!" Pan called out, causing Russell to freeze in place.

Pan ruffled Russell's hair as he walked past the frozen vampire to face Cruella and Ardyn.

Cruella pulled out her pistol and pointed it at Pan. "I will blow a hole right through that pretty face of yours!"

"I have a better idea, Cruella," Ardyn said with a laugh. "Let's let him have a taste of true darkness!"

Ardyn fired a streak of dark energy from his hands that spiraled towards Pan. Pan flew away from the dark magic and dispersed it with a spell of his own. A dagger appeared in Pan's hand and he hurled it at his opponents. Cruella and Ardyn ducked, but they found they didn't have to. Russell caught the dagger by letting it sink into his own chest. Russell pulled the bloody dagger from his chest, and the wound instantly healed.

"I believe this is yours!" Russell called out as he threw the dagger back to Pan.

Pan simply caught it without breaking a sweat. Pan then made a gesture at Russell that the vampire recognized as a spell. When nothing happened, Russell looked over himself and his unharmed allies feeling quite confused. However, the source of the spell made itself known when a powerful geyser erupted underneath Russell's feet, sending the vampire hurtling through the air and over the mountain range.
Cruella and Ardyn turned their full attention towards attacking Pan. Cruella fired her gun several times at Pan, though she seemed to miss without Pan having to dodge. Ardyn transformed himself into a wisp of smoke that flew away from Pan's notice while the boy was performing effortless aerial stunts to dodge Cruella's bullets. The wisp of smoke flew up to Pan, and as Ardyn returned to human form, he slammed the blunt end of his blade onto the back of Pan's neck.

Pan cried out in pain and unleashed a shockwave of magic that sent Ardyn hurtling back towards the ground. As Pan attempted to blink the stars from his eyes, he was ignorant to the speeding aerial assault heading his way. Russell punched Pan as he came in for impact, knocking the teenager back to the ground. Russell dove greedily towards his prey, but when he arrived on the ground, Pan had vanished.

"Cowardly little prick," Russell spat.

Demyx-Ansem hovered in mid air, his torso radiating a powerful crimson energy that drew Hades and Maleficent in closer to him. With a triumphant yell, Demyx-Ansem unleashed several razor sharp ribbons of darkness upon his two opponents, dealing them both painful cuts. Hades recovered quickly and began to hurl blasts of fire at Demyx-Ansem, who tossed them aside with a deflection shield as if they were nothing.

Maleficent raised her staff above her head and began to chant, "Thunder's might and lightning STRIKE!"

A storm cloud crackling with dark lightning took shape above their heads. Demyx-Ansem, however, did not seem to fear the coming storm. He tossed Hades aside with a gesture and propelled himself upward into the cloud. Maleficent tried to will her enchanted cloud to strike Demyx-Ansem from within, but, alas, her spell was not quick enough. Crimson energy pulsed from the eye of the storm, and the cloud quickly dispersed and dissolved, leaving Demyx-Ansem hovering smugly amongst the mist.

"NO!" Hades and Maleficent shouted in unison as flames flared up around them both.

Demyx-Ansem merely laughed. "You think yourselves to be gods? You are but children! And I am far beyond anything you can comprehend!"

With a wave of his arm, a swarm of Heartless appeared in the sky. The fearsome Demon Tide began to speed down towards the earth. Maleficent gasped as the Tide crashed into Hades, covering him in the darkness. Maleficent could hear Hades's cries of rage from within the Demon Tide, and a great explosion of fire incinerated the Heartless that Demyx-Ansem had unleashed. Hades struggled to get to his feet and dust off the darkness.

"Was that supposed to hurt?" Hades asked through gritted teeth.

"Behold the Mistress of All Evil!" Maleficent boasted as she assumed her fearsome dragon form.

Demyx-Ansem laughed confidently as the dragon roared threateningly at him. Even a beast as fearsome as the one that had killed his original self, Xehanort, was of no threat to Demyx-Ansem.

"Give 'em Hell for me, babe!" Hades yelled, cheering on his queen.

Maleficent soared through the skies, and as she reared back around, she unleashed a powerful jet of fire directly at Demyx-Ansem.

"COME GUARDIAN!" Demyx-Ansem called out.
Ansem's ever-faithful dark guardian appeared in front of him to shield its master from the flames. The guardian wasn't even phased by the jets of fire, and Demyx-Ansem seemed to find the increase in temperature only mildly annoying. As the flames subsided, the guardian vanished back into the ether, and Maleficent reared back for another attack. This time, Demyx-Ansem got the drop on her. He unleashed a blast of dark energy directly into Maleficent's mouth as she attempted to breathe fire. The darkness blast struck the back of Maleficent's throat and caused her to gag and tumble around through the air in a disoriented state.

Hades mounted his chariot and flew up to join the fray. Demyx-Ansem threw several blasts of darkness his way, but the Lord of the Dead swerved skillfully around them. The blasts did nothing to deter Hades from his course of action. Once Hades was at an even altitude with Demyx-Ansem, Hades's arms extended into two jets of fire aimed at his opponent. Demyx-Ansem sighed and summoned his guardian to block those attacks as well.

"Attempting the exact same strategy as your woman?" Demyx-Ansem asked. "How disappointing. I never took you for a complete fool. If you were one of my students; you wouldn't be one for long."

"Yeah, I know I'm not the brightest flame in the candelabra," Hades said, never relenting from his attack. "But I do have one good use."

"And what could that possibly be?" Demyx-Ansem asked with a scoff.

"I make a great distraction," Hades said, showing off his pointed teeth.

Demyx-Ansem turned around just in time to see the chartreuse fire of the recovered Maleficent engulfing him from his unprotected side. Demyx-Ansem cried out in agony as the fire seared his flesh. Maleficent did not relent her fiery breath until she saw the now unrecognizable burned Demyx-Ansem warp away into the darkness. Hades and Maleficent knew he would likely survive, but their old enemy would trouble them no further that day.

As Demyx-Ansem vanished, the dark coffins containing Jafar, Grimhilde, Hook, and Daken vanished, and the four captive Overtakers awoke.

"And now we must put our faith in Loki and Doom," Maleficent said as she looked thoughtfully at the spot where they had vanished.

The arena that Doom, Loki, and Morgan found themselves in seemed to be a crumbling ruins of various points in history. A floating skyscraper passed a medieval castle, whilst debris from a space station barely missed the hull of an old Viking ship. Morgan le Fay, being used to moving through time, was able to adjust to the change in dimensions quicker than her two opponents. She laughed wickedly once she saw the two Overtakers before her.

"How fitting that I should get to destroy you two," Morgan taunted. "The thief who stole the secrets of my magic and scorned my flesh, and the little flit who turned his head away from me. I shall enjoy ripping you both limb from limb!"

"You really know how to choose your lovers, don't you?" Loki whispered to Doom.

"Shut up, Loki," Doom growled.

"You don't see any of my former paramours trying to kill us," Loki pointed out. "... Well, technically Mephisto, but he hates you more than he hates me."

"Loki, I said to shut- wait, Mephisto?" Doom asked with disgust in his voice.
"I'll be happy to let you speak with him personally," Morgan said. "After I RIP YOUR SOULS APART AND HURL THEM INTO HELL!"

"We deal with her first," Loki said as he drew his scepter.

"This conversation is not over," Doom warned. "Petrificus totalus!"

Doom's spell froze Morgan le Fay in place, unable to move or cast a counter spell. However, Morgan le Fay was a master of time, and a simple petrification spell would not stop her. Two new Morgan le Fays appeared from the time stream. One of them went straight for Doom, practically tackling him out of the way. The other Morgan wielded an enchanted crossbow. The sorceress loosed an arrow, but Loki caught it by the shaft, inches away from his face. Loki smugly waved the arrow around as the first Morgan le Fay shook off her petrification and threw an explosion spell into Loki's face.

Morgan watched as the God of Mischief crashed through a glass window of a skyscraper and cackled triumphantly, but she did not see Doom unleash a blast of telekinetic energy that swept her off her feet and sent her tumbling down into an Antebellum graveyard. The two other Morgan Le Fays attempted to fly to their earlier self's rescue, but Doom was prepared for them. Doom unleashed several miniature heat seeking missile from his armor. The missiles found the two Morgans and blew them into nothing more than splatters of blood and chunks of flesh.

Loki pulled himself to his feet and found his footing on an uneven terrace attached to the skyscraper. However, across the way, another Morgan materialized in the parking lot of a 1960s style gas station. She fired a blast of magic that sent Loki crashing into the building and falling into what appeared to be an ancient Greek temple. Morgan teleported in after him.

"If you hadn't been such a meddlesome man-whore, perhaps you might have been spared my wrath," Morgan taunted. "If it's any consolation, you never deserved Victor."

"ENOUGH!" Loki shouted as he rose to his feet. "You are NOTHING compared to me! You're nothing but a hag from bygone era. I am god! And I'll not stand for-"

But Loki found himself interrupted by Morgan le Fay telekinetically hurling a boulder into him. His Asgardian durability spared him from severe injury, but it was if a wrecking ball had just slammed into him. He was sent hurtling through the air and mentally chastised himself for allowing a monologue to distract him. Loki imagined that this must've been how Xemnas felt.

"The standards for gods have certainly fallen," Morgan said smugly as she turned away.

However, as she turned around, a jagged piece of scrap metal pierced her abdomen and pinned her to the wall. Satisfied that the weapon he threw had indeed killed that Morgan, Doom flew in the opposite direction towards Loki.

Loki meanwhile crashed down into the Antebellum cemetery where the other Morgan had landed before. Morgan had already healed her wounds from her crash landing, and she grinned wickedly when she saw Loki trying to pull himself up on one of the headstones. Morgan stumbled over to the injured Loki and grabbed him by the collar of his cape. Morgan pulled Loki to his feet and set jolts of torturous magic coursing through his body. Loki cried out in pain at Morgan's magic, and she cackled with fiendish glee.

"Petrificus totalus!" Doom shouted as flew down and cast his petrification spell on Morgan.

As Morgan froze in place, Loki materialized a dagger in his hand and plunged it into her heart. Loki
threw the dead Morgan off of him and struggled to catch his breath.

"She's going to win a war of attrition against us at this rate," Loki said. "We need a way to end this now!"

"If we can get her to the altar, we can kill two birds with one stone," Doom said.

Doom activated his time cube, and he and Loki warped out of the pocket dimension. They returned to the basin that was once filled with Phlegethon water but now was only home to the altar of death.

"Did she follow us?" Loki asked.

Morgan le Fay appeared out of time as unharmed and alive as ever, smiling smugly as she approached her quarry.

"You cannot escape me, even here," she boasted. "And now it is time to end our long feud."

"I quite agree," Doom replied. "*Petrificus totalus!*"

Morgan was frozen in place once again, though this only seemed to annoy her more than anything. Loki and Doom then stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Recalling the same spell they used to defeat Odin, the two raised their arms together and produced a large shimmering emerald blade of magic. Loki and Doom levitated into the air, and, moving as if they were one in the same, they sliced the energy blade across Morgan once, then twice, then three times, before finally ending their assault with a fourth slash cutting Morgan right down the middle.

Morgan cried out in pain and stumbled backwards. She had died many times before, but this time was different. This time the cold hand of death felt real and permanent. Her eyes glistened with tears as she stumbled back onto the altar. Doom and Loki watched with sober expression as Morgan exploded into purple dust that coated the death altar. The altar began to glow in recognition of the sacrifice that had been made, and the large gemstone appeared, levitating above the altar as if gravity held no meaning to it.

"It's ours!" Loki said with a laugh. "It's done then!"

"Indeed," Doom said somberly as he scooped up a handful of Morgan's ashes.

"You seem troubled, Victor," Loki said as he studied his lover.

"I am pleased by this turn of events, do not mistake me," Doom said as he let the ashes pass through his fingers. "Yet, I always knew that parting with Morgan le Fay would not be a truly happy occasion. Even with her insanity and vengefulness, I shall miss her."

Loki nodded in understanding.

Chapter End Notes

Content warning is for mentions of blood and gore, as well as for character death.
Maleficent placed the gemstone securely in the chest and cast a powerful protection spell over it to ensure that none would be able to steal the gem from her.

"A simple spell but quite unbreakable," Maleficent explained to Hades and Ursula. "The gem will remain here until we require its use."

"One down, two to go," Hades announced with a smirk. "And we finally got that pain in the flame witch with a capital 'B', Morgan le Fay, down for the count permanently. I dunno about you gals, but I feel like celebrating!"

Hades summoned up three glasses and an ancient bottle of wine from his cache.

"Babes, this is the good stuff," Hades said. "Titonamachy vintage. Felt appropriate to break it out after having just won a victory over Cronus's flunkies."

"Did you make sure that gem was the real one?" Ursula asked suspiciously. "After all, it was Doom and Loki who got it. Love those boys, but they are absolutely the type to keep the real gem for themselves."

"I performed every verification spell I know," Maleficent explained as Hades filled her glass. "Any magic those two could perform would have made itself known to me in the process. The gem is indeed genuine."

Satisfied with that answer, Ursula raised her glass to get a helping of the wine from Hades.

"Can't be too careful these days," Ursula said. "After what happened with Demyx, I don't know who to trust. Fish was just beside herself when I told her. She was quite fond of the boy, after all."

"Well he's deadsville now if he wasn't already," Hades said. "Malef and I had to roast him in our fight. Ansem'll probably grab a new body, but Dem-Dem won't pull through. Anyway, where is Fishy? I didn't see her come back with ya."

"She's staying back in Gotham for a while," Ursula explained as she chugged her wine as if it were water. "She said it was to help Penguin rebuild his empire, but I think she's actually embarrassed to face you after Demyx turned traitor."

"We do not hold her accountable for his betrayal," Maleficent assured Ursula. "We were all deceived by Ansem's machinations. If anyone bears my wrath for this oversight, it is Doom for not disposing of Ansem properly when he had the chance. However, Doom more than redeemed himself by delivering the gem, so we shall leave the blame for Ansem alone."

"The traitor bubble was bound to burst sooner or later," Ursula said. "It's just lucky we came out for the better after it."

"Unfortunately, I fear it was but the first of many," Maleficent said. "Imperious may not have been behind this treachery, but it's only a matter of time. Amora and Daken are equally concerning, and though I trust Doom, Loki, and Jafar not to openly betray us, we must be ever vigilant."

"Way to kill a buzz, babe," Hades said with a sigh as he sat down his wine glass. "We've got one third of omnipotence sittin' right here in this box. Up close, I recognize it as the one called the Fist of Might. Of course, we need all three together to do any big jobs, but we've got the gem that harnesses
the raw power of creation. So traitor-shmaitor. We can destroy them like that!"

To punctuate his meaning, Hades snapped his fingers.

"We should not be careless in our use of the gems unless we wish to draw the attention of the heroes," Maleficent warned, "but you raise a valid point: we now hold the might of the cosmos itself. Our authority will not be questioned as long as we do not lack the courage to enforce it."

'So if we've got 'Might' locked up here," Ursula began, "What are the other two?"

"This one's twin is the Fist of Ability," Hades explained. "Sounds similar, but they're different. Might is power; Ability is control. It's prowess, it's expertise, it's competency. Might gives ya the strength ya need; Ability is everything else ya need to make it happen. That one'll probably be in Po-Po's element, namely water. Zeusy's element, air, will probably have the Eye of Cronus. It focuses your vision of Universal Time. It lets ya see every outcome, every reality, and everything ya need to do to make it happen. It's what lets you channel the Might and Ability to bend reality to be whatever you want it to be."

"And we should not delay the acquisition of either," Maleficent chimed in. "Hades, set to work immediately locating them. Perhaps your Doctor Facilier friend can locate them."

Hades saluted. "I'm on it, boss."

"Now, now, you two have only just returned," Ursula said. "The next gem is in water, innit? Leave that one to me. You two just enjoy your victory and catch your breath."

Maleficent nodded in agreement as Ursula vanished into a Corridor of Darkness. Hades wrapped his arm around Maleficent and gave her a quick kiss.

"We're actually doin' it, babe," Hades said. "The Fist of Might is all ours, the others will be ours too in a Hermes minute, and we've got our eyes locked on lil' miss Rapunzel to get some lights out time!"

"Yes indeed," Maleficent said with a smile as she stroked the side of Hades's face. "A universe of our making where none can challenge us is just on the horizon."

"YES!" Hades said as his flames flared up in celebration. "Give Bolt Boy a taste of his own medicine, and then do a lil' pest control with those good fairies. No more of that 'Make it pink! Make it blue!'"

"Quite so," Maleficent nodded, "for we'll turn their jolly pinks and blues to black."

Diablo cawed as he flew from his perch out into the night sky, the flutter of his ebony wings illustrating the point. A devilish grin grew on Hades's face as he and Maleficent walked out onto their balcony overlooking the Overtaken Kingdom.

"A black bird flyin' over a black moon!" Hades suggested.

"A blackened sky unperturbed by blackened lights," Maleficent added.

"Black hearts!" Hades said with a chuckle.

"Black keyblades," Maleficent said with a grin.

"Black diamonds!" Hades said as he summoned up a handful of onyx colored gemstones.
"Everything all black!" Maleficent declared with an evil cackle that shook the night.

Hades wrapped his arms around Maleficent again and pulled her into an embrace as they swayed back and forth.

"Mmm, baby, take me to the dark side," Hades said.

"Together, we can kill the Seven Lights," Maleficent said as she imagined glorious images of her enemies' deaths, "and then dance in the darkness."

"Hell yeah, we'll dance to our black souls' content!" Hades declared as the two began to dance.

Hook awoke to the sound of two men trying to quietly have an argument on the other side of his bedroom. And by "trying," he really meant "failing." After all, Jafar was many things, but "quiet" had never been one.

"I'm sure your magic is competent," Ardyn Izunia said with a sigh. "But as I am an actual experienced healer, Maleficent specifically requested that I tend to the captain's wounds."

"And as I told you, I have everything under control," Jafar said. "So why don't you go bother someone who actually wants your help."

"If he has rum, I want his help," Hook chimed in.

"You stay out of this!" Jafar hissed to silence him.

And thus Jafar continued to argue for what was best for Hook while Hook laid in bed within earshot saying nothing. After a few more tries, Ardyn left the room with a sigh, leaving Jafar and Hook alone together.

"Would it truly have been so terrible to allow him to heal me?" Hook asked after Ardyn was gone.

"Yes," Jafar answered. "He can absorb memories through physical contact and turn mortal men into daemons under his thrall. I've told you before: you cannot take for granted that our allies will always be trustworthy."

"Yes I learned that lesson quite well from how cruel and vicious you were towards me," Hook said as he struggled to sit up and feeling the lingering sting of his injuries.

"I only said that which I-", Jafar began but caught himself and cleared his throat. "Apologies. I am... not particularly used to considering the wiles of others. I've never cared about anyone other than myself. You of all people should understand that. Yet that does not excuse how beastly I behaved after we returned from Lalotai. It was base anger, and thus beneath me."

"Well it takes a bold man indeed to admit that he was wrong," Hook said. "I appreciate it, mate."

Jafar was looking especially uncomfortable in his own skin at that moment. "Now if we can please move on, I loathe sentimentality."

"Of course," Hook nodded. "I saved you from Tamatoa; you saved me from Pan. I'd say we're about even. No use dwelling further on the matter."

Jafar wanted to argue that he never needed saving from Tamatoa, but the reality that he never actually succeeded in saving Hook from Pan kept him from pressing the issue.
"Now, we must focus our attentions on securing the lamp," Jafar said. "I've been planning for a new approach, and I think I may know exactly what we need to wrest it from that infernal crab."

"Ah, yes, the lamp," Hook said awkwardly. "Well, you see, there's no easy way to say this... Ah... Well, I actually stole the lamp from Tamatoa when you weren't looking. It was to be a surprise once we returned to the castle."

"WHAT?" Jafar asked, his eyes twinkling greedily. "You have it? Give it to me at once!"

"That's... where things get complicated," Hook said. "You started acting like a git, so I kept it on my person at all times. It was in my satchel... which Pan has."

Hook expected Jafar to yell and scream in anger. He expected his lover's pure unfiltered rage. But, instead, Jafar was grinning widely from ear to ear in a way that confused Hook.

"Am I being lulled into a false sense of security before you smother me with my own pillows?" Hook asked cautiously. "Because you're taking this far too well."

"No," Jafar said, shaking his head and never allowing his devilish grin to fade. "Get dressed. There is something you should see."

Hook threw on a baggy black ruffled shirt and a pair of cloth pants that had been black at some point but now were a faded shade of gray after years of exposure to the salty sea air and sunlight. He didn't bother with any of his tight leather clothing that could tear at the lacerations and stitches that decorated his body. Jafar lead Hook down the hall a bit into the chamber that Jafar had claimed for his magic laboratory. The room was almost an exact replica of his lair back in Agrabah.

"I've been to your lab on multiple occasions, and there's rarely anything of note to gaze upon," Hook said with a sigh. "If you've lured me here to force feed me some torturous potion as punishment for losing the lamp, I'm returning to the warmth of my bed."

Jafar shook his head. "Patience, Hook, patience. Things aren't always what they seem."

Jafar walked over to a candelabra on the far side of the room. He bent down the third prong and twisted it all the way around. As he did, a section of the wall slid away, revealing a staircase illuminated by an eerie red light.

"You built a secret room?" Hook asked with a raised eyebrow. "Why does this not surprise me?"

Hook followed Jafar down the hidden staircase, and when they arrived in the secret room, Hook couldn't help but grin. Chained to the far wall, restrained by anti-magic manacles, was none of than Peter Pan himself.

"You captured the bloody demon?" Hook asked.

"Indeed I did," Jafar said. "I whisked him away from the battle at the last moment. It simply wouldn't do for Edgington to murder the boy, not when there are so many things worse than death. I figured that you and I could... explore those options."

"I know Pan quite well," Hook said. "A nasty, greedy little boy like him won't have shared his prize with Cronus or the others. He'll have hidden it away for his own personal use."

"It may require a bit of force, but the boy will reveal the lamp's location to us," Jafar declared.

"Aye," Hook agreed with a wide and sinister smile at finally having Pan at his mercy. "That he will."
Steve Newlin was slumped over his desk, reading and rereading the letter Imperious had left for him.

*Dear Steve,*

_I truly treasure our friendship, and I am looking forward to expanding that friendship. After all, friends do little things for each other like keeping secrets and running errands. Speaking of which, I have a little errand for you if it's no trouble. The details are a bit of a bore. Flydor will fill you in._

~ Imperious

Steve had no idea what kind of errand Imperious had in mind, but he was sure about one thing: this wasn't going to be a one time ordeal. Imperious would hold this over his head indefinitely if he didn't think of a way out. A knock at the door pulled Steve's attention away. Steve quickly shuffled several of his television scripts over the letter to hide it.

"Come in," Steve called out.

Russell entered the room and crossed over to Steve's desk. He gave his boyfriend a quick kiss before hopping up on the desk and attempting to pose seductively.

"Hello darlin'," Russell said. "I'm feelin' a bit peckish, and we've hardly had any time to ourselves lately. I was thinkin' we'd go out and grab a bite. I've been havin' a hankerin' for carnival food. I know it ain't exactly the most sanitary place to eat, but there's a whole smorgasbord to choose from at this lovely little fair I've been eyein' over in Gotham city. Lots of interesting people from all around to meet and eat."

Steve wanted to say yes. He wanted to go with Russell. But Imperious was waiting, and who knew what the sorcerer would do if Steve delayed. At any rate, Steve didn't particularly want to have to keep up appearances around Russell right now. Russell knew him too well. He'd sense that something was wrong. Steve couldn't drag him into this mess.

"Can't," Steve said. "Busy working. Real important show tomorrow."

"You're always workin'!" Russell explained. "Come on, even Jafar doesn't have a stick up his ass this much. We're Overtakers! Villains and vampires! We go out and cause pain and misery. Or did I miss the part about sittin' around memorizing index cards."

Steve gathered up the papers on his desk and slid them into his briefcase. "Sorry baby, I'd love to, but I really can't tonight. With the election so soon, I've got to be on top of everything."

Russell pouted, and Steve gave him an apology kiss on the way out. As Steve stole through the hallways of Villain's Vale, he quickly realized that he was being followed. Steve's vampiric powers had a tendency to come and go after the ordeal with the Dragon's Tooth, and his stalker was particularly good at being stealthy. However, Steve's sensitive nose was able to pick up the distinct stench of cologne.

"Daken, you can come out now," Steve called out into the shadows.

"Come out? I was never in, darling," Daken said as he came into view.

"Don't you have anything better you should be doing?" Steve asked with a sigh. "In case you've forgotten, we have a historic election coming up in a few days, and I believe I entrusted you to have your gangs work at some voter suppression in our favor."
"Lighten up, I got that already covered," Daken said. "But you're in a bad way right now, and I'm worried about little Stevie-Weavie."

Steve gave an angry laugh at that. "Oh fuck you, Daken. You're so full of shit, and I really don't have time for this bullshit tonight."

"Well if you're going to be a bitch, then I'll go," Daken said with a scoff. "But I was being serious before. I can tell you're in some kind of trouble, and contrary to what you might think, you're one of the few people I actually don't despise around here. If you need a friend to help you stab whatever needs stabbing and not ask too many questions, I'm available."

Steve couldn't tell if it was Daken's charm powers or his own desire to have someone on his team right now, but Steve was genuinely moved by Daken's words. The two of them had, after all, gotten out of worse situations together before.

"Fine, you can come along," Steve said. "Don't make me regret this."

"Would you ever regret having someone as gorgeous as me along?" Daken asked with a wink.

"Don't ask questions you don't actually want the answers to," Steve warned with a laugh.

Pete and Mary Sanderson strolled down the streets of Radiant Garden together as the last flickers of the sun vanished over the horizon. Mary hadn't ever considered the possibility that a man would take any interest in her (Winnie had always been very clear about how undesirable Mary was), and yet Pete had asked her to go out on a date with him. At first Mary thought it was his idea of a joke, but when he insisted that he was serious, Mary practically leapt at the opportunity. They'd had a lovely dinner together, and the conversations never lulled as they went on an after dinner walk through the gardens.

"And that was when I had to give my past self a knuckle-sandwich! But it was worth it to get me the boat," Pete said, completing the story of the time he'd stolen his own steamboat.

Mary giggled at that. "Thou must be jesting with me!"

"Nope, nope, true story," Pete said with a chuckle. "Pretty sure it's the reason I've got this weird poppin' noise in my jaw every time I eat steak today."

"Oh Pete, the adventures you've undergone throughout the great multitude of worlds is simply extraordinary," Mary said. "I'd love to see some of those worlds myself."

"Well I can take ya sometime!" Pete suggested. "After all, we're the Overtakers, see? We can go and do whatever we want to!"

"Oh... I am uncertain of that...," Mary admitted. "Thou must surely realize my sister wouldst not be happy with me leaving her side for long. Winnie is a very busy person, you know."

Pete made a grunting noise that made no secret of his contempt for Winnie. Mary, however, didn't seem to notice and soon after became distracted by a flower bed.

"Behold!" Mary said. "T'is a caster bean plant in yonder bed. Its seed coatings contain a poison most gruesome, causing nausea and internal bleeding. T'is quite a laugh that one would grow it in a public botanical garden."

"Well it don't look so dangerous to me," Pete said. "But I guess looks can be all deceivin'-like. After
all, you seem like a sweet lady who'd never hurt no fly, but you're actually a powerful and dangerous witch."

Mary seemed taken aback by that. "Thou must be thinking of my sister. I am hardly powerful or dangerous. I am naught but an incompetent fool."

Pete shook his head and plucked a purplish-green leaf from the caster bean plant and tucked it into Mary's hair, creating the illusion that she had a tiara propped on her head.

"Nope, you're a genuine caster bean plant," Pete said. "You're one dangerous and beeeeeeautiful lady."

Mary simply blushed at that. "Thou dost flatter me too much."

"Indeed thou dost!" Winnie said as she stormed angrily towards them.

"Oh, um, Winnie, I'm sorry," Mary said, pulling the leaf from her hair and tucking it into her apron. "I just wanted to-"

"Silence!" Winnie commanded. "I'll have your guts for garters! Thou has but a single job: obeying my whims. Yet thou hast been absent from tending to my cauldron's fire!"

"Yes, Winnie, sorry Winnie," Mary said sheepishly as she warped through a Corridor of Darkness back to Villain's Vale.

"And YOU!" Winnie said, turning her anger on Pete. "You might fool mine sister, but you cannot fool me! I see thou what thou art: a meddlesome fool seeking to tear sisters apart!"

"I ain't doin' nothin' of the sort!" Pete said, his frustration growing. "I'm just bein' nice to her, and if your lil' sister coven is crumblin' over that, that's just because you're a rotten sister to her!"

Winnie gasped in rage. "Thou knowest NOTHING! Stay away from my family, or I will turn thee into a toad!"

With her threat delivered, Winnie too vanished from the garden, leaving Pete alone to slump on a park bench and lament the poor end to a genuinely pleasant evening.

Doom adjusted the heat on the Bunsen burner he was using to brew his potion and then flitted over to the computer terminal that controlled the recombinator in order to adjust the necessary coding. The golden apple of Idunn sat on an immaculately clean silver plate, and its shimmering surface glistened in the lighting from the various machines and glowing talismans strung up around the lab. Loki strolled about with an ugly sneer ever present on his face as he examined Doom's set up.

"I am aware that Morgan le Fay, Hela rest her soul, was an incompetent teacher, more concerned with lust than sorcery," Loki said after a minute. "But surely she did not fail to mention that mixing magic is highly inadvisable. The apple is Asgardian and most of the sigils are as well, but you've got charms from a Slavic form of demon witchcraft, potions brewed in Morganian style, and then of course your mortal Midgardian technology. You're more likely to blow the Eminence Palace off the face of this world than you are to successfully accomplish Dei-forming."

"Only cowards shy away from that which should not be done," Doom said without looking up from his computer. "Innovation and boldness do not recognize your conventional wisdom, or lack thereof. I have calculated the risk and reward to the last decimal, and the odds favor Doom."
"But do they favor Victor?" Loki asked. "Remember what I told you about the apple's magic. You'd be far better off with a conventional Dei-forming ritual that I could offer you."

Doom dashed away from his computer and began to tinker with the recombinator itself. "Dei-forming can turn the mortal undergoing the process into a golem without the strength to defy his creator. I would be placing all power, control, and bodily autonomy in your hands."

Loki gasped with mock offense. "After all this time, you still do not trust me enough to relinquish any control, Doom?"

"Such is not possible, even if were of a mind to give my trust to others," Doom replied, still never looking away from his work. "Care for you though I do, I still recognize that there are some vessels into whose emptiness such things should never be placed."

"I am wounded," Loki replied.

"You are false," Doom retorted.

Loki shrugged, unable to argue with that. "Yes, well, that too."

"The golden apples are the food of the gods," Doom explained. "Mortal consumption would, under normal circumstances, result in deathly illness. However, with the Neogenic recombinator, I can augment my very DNA to mimic that of an Asgardian to best receive the apple's powers. As a former receptacle for Odin's power, his was the ideal DNA to use. Quite fortunate that I kept a sample from his time as a guest in Castle Doom."

Loki let out an audible to scoff convey his disapproval, but he said nothing further.

"The runes, charms, and potions are to counteract the mystical element," Doom continued. "Though the magic is of a variety of origins, all serve a unique purpose that contributes to ensuring that my body safely receives and retains the mystical properties of the apple. There is no magic present that Doom does not completely understand nor any that would interact in any way to counter or aggravate another spell."

"Were you this confident about that machine in college that you claim Richards sabotaged?" Loki asked with a fiendish smirk.

Loki could tell that statement struck a nerve because for the first time since he'd arrived, Doom looked away from his work to face Loki.

"You can wait outside, trickster," Doom ordered.

Loki shrugged and vanished in a blur of green light. With Loki gone, Doom turned his attention towards making a few final preparations. Once all was ready, Doom removed his armor with a simple spell, leaving it to stand at attention by the workbench. Victor turned on the recombinator and picked up the apple. He could see his reflection on the apple's surface. Victor scowled when he looked upon his scar, his one single solitary imperfection, an imperfection that had to be hidden from the rest of the world, an imperfection that showed that Victor von Doom was nothing more than a mortal man.

But all that was about to change. Victor held the apple to his lips and took a bite. The fruit was the most wonderful thing Victor had ever tasted. It was the fruit of the gods, and it even tasted like power. Then, suddenly, it began to sting. Magic soared about Victor's mouth as he felt a force push him back. He felt like something was crawling inside of him struggling to escape. Victor's knees gave out, and he collapsed to the floor.
Then everything faded to black.
To the Victor Goes the Spoils

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rumble of thunder shook Doom awake. He opened his eyes to find himself in a familiar grove of trees. The shadow of Castle Doom loomed behind him, no longer a pile of debris but, rather, the mighty and towering fortress it had been once before. Doom was vaguely aware that he had been dressed in his armor, though he couldn't remember dressing himself. As Doom surveyed his surroundings, a light pierced the gloom. Doom's curiosity outweighed his caution, and he approached it. As he got close, he saw that the light came from a lantern being held by a familiar old white-bearded man dressed in a hat and trench coat.

"Boris?" Doom asked as he recognized the figure.

"Yes master," Boris nodded.

Boris had been Doom's closest and most trusted servant. He'd been a friend of Doom's father and a member of the same gypsy tribe that Doom grew up in. Boris had always been by Doom's side, and the sight of him now brought a certain comfort and contentment to Doom.

"Castle Doom has been rebuilt," Doom remarked. "But how? I have not yet achieved such a feat."

"Alas, my lord is mistaken," Boris answered. "What does my lord remember before he awoke here?"

Doom paused for a moment and allowed the memories to return to him. The golden apple. The spells. The procedure. He'd fallen, felt ill, passed out in his lab.

"Then this is naught but a dream... a hallucination," Doom said, piecing together the truth.

"A dream, yes," Boris nodded. "But a hallucination? No. This is your own heart between the Realm of Sleep and the Realm of Death. The path to immortality teeters along that very line."

"Then this is the apple's test?" Doom asked. "To conquer this ordeal is to gain the prize I seek?"

Boris nodded. "I have been present to witness most of your life. Therefore, I shall be the one to guide you."

"And are you figment or phantom?" Doom asked. "When I was taken from Castle Doom, you still appeared to be in good health."

"A state Lucia von Bardas rectified," Boris answered. "When I insisted that you would return and that we should wait for you, she insisted that I was far too much of a political risk to leave alive."

"She will pay for her insolence," Doom growled as rage bubbled inside of him.

Boris merely shook his head. "But master, she has paid with her life. There is little else to be done. My purpose now is only to guide you. Do not waste your rage over me. Along this path, you will encounter three shadows of your past who will test your resolve."

"How very Dickensian," Doom said. "Very well then. Escort me to the first of these trials."

Boris motioned for Doom to follow, and he proceeded down the muddied path in silence. Doom loathed proceeding on foot through the sludge as if he were of some common throng, but he knew
that this path was not as literal as he was currently perceiving it. How far they'd gone, Doom couldn't say. Though the geography was distinctly that of Latveria, it seemed to be more of a crudely stitched together version of his homeland. A simple stroll through the woods in the shadows of the castle carried them miles away.

Boris stopped in his tracks and gestured towards a stream down the way a bit. Doom knew that he would proceed without Boris for this part of the journey. Yet as Doom neared the stream, the rain abruptly stopped without leaving any trace it had been raining at all. Doom recognized this area as the woods outside of Miskolc, the area his clan set up camp in every year to prepare for winter. And that was when he saw her sitting on a boulder along the banks. Raven haired and just as beautiful as she always was in his memory, Valeria smiled when she saw Doom.

"Hello Victor," Valeria said.

The sound of her voice was like a dagger to the heart, and the sickening implications dawned upon Doom.

"Then you are to be my first trial?" Doom asked.

Valeria nodded. "There is much we must discuss and little time to do so."

Valeria knelt down to reach into the satchel beside her, allowing her ebony hair to cascade down from her shoulders. It was still the most beautiful hair he'd ever seen. Doom briefly mused that his love of raven hair that first attracted him to Morgan and Loki started here. Valeria pushed her hair out of her face and pulled a simple mahogany music box out of her bag.

"Do you remember, Victor?" Valeria asked.

"Doom remembers all," he replied.

It was the same music box that he'd built for her when they were young. Back then, the clan had very little and so gifts had to be made by hand. Even as a boy, Doom had a certain aptitude for inventing. Valeria began to crank the music box, and with each crank, time itself seemed to turn back. The sun set in the East, leaves flew from the ground and reattached to trees, and the old became young once more.

"Eeee, Victor, no! My dress!"

"No one dunks von Doom and lives to tell the tale!"

Frolicking and giggling together in the stream, young Victor von Doom and Valeria were the innocence of youth incarnate. Young love had sprung between them, and they remained blissfully unaware of the twists that fate had in store for them. The dulcet tones of the music box playing their song punctuated the moment beautifully.

"You were the only one who knew how to make me smile," Doom remarked.

"We had joy in our hearts... once," Valeria said with sadness in her voice.

"Look at us," young Valeria said, gesturing to their soaking wet clothes. "We're going to be in so much trouble, Victor."

"Don't worry, Valeria," young Victor replied. "We'll just tell them you saved me from drowning."

"In four feet of water, Victor?" young Valeria asked slyly.
"Hmmm," young Victor said, deep in thought. "Then perhaps there should be a sea serpent in our story too."

The two young people laughed at their little joke and began to walk back to camp. Valeria cranked the music box again, this time moving time forward. The environment around them changed to the interior of a small American home. Even without seeing anything of note, Doom knew exactly where he was. This day was burned into his mind deeper than any other. He turned on Valeria angrily.

"I have no need to revisit this scene," Doom spat. "Doom is well aware of exactly what transpired h-"

"You will watch," Valeria ordered, her voice echoing with a power that shook Doom to his core.

Unable to defy her, Doom turned to face the scene in front of him. Victor was standing there, his scarred face exposed, and Valeria was standing in front of him. She held a golden locket in her hands, and Doom knew quite well that it contained pictures of them in their youth. The music box sang its tune, only this time, the happy sounds seemed a harbinger of tragedy.

"I... I'm so confused," the past Valeria said. "This is not at all what I... what I expected of you. I can't... promise anything, Victor. We have so much to discuss before-"

"Understood," the past Victor interrupted as he fastened the locket around her neck. "Just tell me that there is a chance for us."

"Certainly," the past Valeria said happily as she took his hands.

"Excellent," the past Victor said with a wry smile.

The locket began to glow with emerald mystical energy, and Valeria began to feel intense pain. She clutched the locket, attempting to rip it from her neck, but to no avail. Runes began to carve themselves onto her flesh as she cried out Victor's name. Doom could hear his past self explaining that this was to be a sacrifice for untold mystical powers, but he barely listened. Doom's eyes never left Valeria as her flesh was torn from her body.

"Farewell my love," the past Victor said as her skin began to mold into a leather armor around him. "Dear, dear Valeria. I will miss you more than any will ever imagine... But I will always hold you close to me."

Valeria's skeleton, still smoking with green energy, collapsed to the floor. The past Doom towered over her, saying one final good-bye as he acclimated to his new, mystical armor. When he'd first bore witness to this sight, Doom comforted himself with the belief that Valeria's sacrifice would mean his ultimate victory and ultimate power. But now Doom knew the fruitless outcome of this scheme. He knew it had all been for naught.

"You murdered me for power," Valeria said coldly.

"It was a mistake," Doom replied. "The scheme failed to destroy Richards and his infernal family, and I was trapped in Hell for months until I was able to escape."

Valeria simply laughed. "A mistake? You only regret my death because it failed to get you what you wanted. Do you truly feel no remorse? No grief? Was our love worth so little to you?"

"I have seen enough of you!" Doom growled. "Take us away from this place."
"You long for immortality, yet you destroy the lives of so many," Valeria accused. "You think immortality will be freedom from these memories? Not so! It will only make these memories eternal. Are you prepared for that?"

"Doom will face any ordeal," he declared.

"But what of Victor?" Valeria shrieked.

Right before his eyes, the beautiful phantom of Valeria's skin tore off, leaving only a grotesque, skeletal form.

"You killed me!" Valeria screamed. "You kill all that you love! You are poison! POISON!"

"ENOUGH!" Doom shouted as he closed his eyes.

Doom could feel the pitter patter of raindrops hitting his armor once more. Doom opened his eyes to see that he was back in the Latverian forest with Boris. Doom gasped for air to catch his breath, and he could feel his heart pounding in his throat.

"Are you well, master?" Boris asked.

Doom paused before answering. "Doctor Doom is ever enduring."

"Very good then," Boris said. "For we must proceed to your second encounter."

Boris led Doom deeper into the rainy woods without saying a word. Despite the limited aesthetic differences, Doom immediately recognized when the woods changed from the trees in Eastern Europe to ones resembling an American forest. Doom grunted in disgust at the path they had taken. Once again Boris halted in his tracks and pointed ahead at a clearing. Doom understood his intentions and proceeded onward.

This time, Doom emerged far from any forest. As Doom looked around, he recognized this area as the quad from Empire State University, the American college he'd attended so many years ago. Standing a few yards away was a figure who made Doom's blood boil. With his blue spandex jumpsuit and chestnut hair greying at the temples, Reed Richards was the spitting image of how he'd looked before Doom had been spirited away to the Hall of Nastrond.

"Richards," Doom growled. "Am I fortuitous enough to be seeing you here because you've finally met a most gruesome demise in the real world?"

"No, I'm still very much alive, Victor," Reed replied. "No thanks to you, I might add. I'm merely an illusion constructed by your memories to serve as your guide."

"After Valeria, you should prove no trouble," Doom remarked. "You've never been Doom's equal, Richards, and you never shall be. Show me your perfidious sabotage of my college experiment. It matters little. Doom has grown beyond it."

"Is that so?" Reed asked. "Then why do you still hide the scar?"

Doom's eyes darkened in rage. His desire to rip out Reed's throat intensified, but he knew that he was still being tested. He would have to withstand the murderous urge for a while longer.

"Are you going to show me whatever it is you believe I should see?" Doom asked. "Or must I endure the sound of your prattle further?"
"Well what would like me to show you, Victor?" Reed asked. "The time you failed to use my team and I to get Blackbeard's treasure? The time your attempt to send the Baxter Building into space ended with you hurtling on an asteroid out of our home galaxy? Or maybe when you were gullible enough to allow me to manipulate you into flying into Galactus's barrier and losing your command of the Silver Surfer's power cosmic? Or perhaps something more recent like when I beat you on the field of sorcery, and your own arrogance resulted in you being dragged into Hell?"

Doom growled at the mentions of his various failures. "Be silent Richards! You boast your victories, yet none have ever been permanent! Doom has always returned more powerful and more determined than ever! You failed to end my threat permanently, and thus ever do I inflict more pain and suffering upon your wretched family."

"My family has a good life," Reed said with a shrug. "Despite all the trials and tribulations, we have love for each other, and we always come out stronger together. And that's something you'll never be able to take away from us, Victor, despite your obsession with us. Although... is that really what you even want?"

"Have I been too subtle in my attempts to destroy you, Richards?" Doom asked. "Perhaps I should send your dreadful son back to Hell to make my meaning plainer."

Doom hoped he struck a nerve with Reed, made him feel the same frustration and rage that was currently burning in Doom's blood. Reed, however, merely smirked and shook his head.

"Let's have a look at one of your more successful schemes," Reed suggested.

In a wash of light, Doom and Reed found themselves inside a control room with various monitors depicting Namor and four of the Avengers preparing to destroy the Psycho-Prism holding the Purple Man inside. The past Doom sat in his chair, observing the drama unfolding on the screens.

"Remember this day?" Reed asked.

Doom said nothing.

"Allow me to remind you," Reed said, not allowing Doom's silence to be a deterrent. "You did it. You conquered the world using the Purple Man's powers. Everyone was completely under your thrall, except for four simple Avengers. You won, Victor. You got what you'd always wanted, and the only thing standing in your way were four superheroes. You'd never have left the Psycho-Prism so unguarded. You know you had nerve gas installed to kill anyone who threatened your device. But look here."

The past Doom reached for the button to release the nerve gas, yet seemed to think better of it and removed his hand. As he did, Namor shattered the Psycho-Prism, ending Doom's control over the Earth.

"What happened, Victor?" Reed asked. "You let them win. You let them defeat you."

"You know nothing, Richards," Doom growled.

"On the contrary, I'm inside of your mind," Reed pointed out. "I know exactly why you did it. You got everything you wanted, and it was boring. There was no one left to challenge you. You love the chase, you love the game, you love the challenge of conquering and tormenting others. But when it comes to actually winning? You can't be satisfied. You're a child looking for entertainment. Nothing more."

Doom whirled around and leaned in close to Reed. "YOU DARE? I stole the powers of Odin and
conquered your pathetic Earth once again! I corrupted it and bent it to my will! And in THAT instance, I did not succumb to a momentary lapse in judgment!"

"But how long would you have enjoyed it if we hadn't stopped you?" Reed asked. "You know deep down that it wouldn't satisfy you. You had the opportunity to kill us all with a gesture, and you failed."

"The Watcher interfered," Doom argued.

"The Watcher interfered because you let him," Reed countered. "You wanted us to survive and try to stop you because it would mean the game wasn't over yet. It's always been about you and me competing in an eternal dance."

"Believe what you wish," Doom hissed. "It matters little. Doom knows himself."

"But have you considered this?" Reed asked. "My family and I won't live forever. One day, all of us will die. If you become immortal, one day you will live in a universe without Reed Richards."

"One can only hope," Doom spat.

"But you'll be bored, Victor," Reed said. "You'll have no one to toy with, no one to torment, nothing to work towards. The Avengers will be gone, Spider-Man will be gone, Doctor Strange will be gone, and if Loki has his way, even Thor will be gone. You exist solely to be the villain, and what's a villain without a hero to face?"

"There will always be insufferable fools like you, Richards, who believe their weakness to be honor," Doom said, sounding less sure of himself than he would have preferred.

"Not if Maleficent's plan works," Reed pointed out. "You have no higher purpose beyond being a villain. There'll be nothing left for you. In gaining immortality, you condemn yourself to an eternity of being unfulfilled."

Doom wanted to argue further, but before he got the chance, Reed vanished into the fog. Mist engulfed his view of past scene, and when it cleared, Doom found himself back in the rainy forest where Boris was waiting. Though Doom was less troubled than he was following his encounter with Valeria, he nevertheless had a great deal weighing on his mind. He wanted to write off Reed's words as more convenient lies, yet the truth of them was almost impossible for Doom to ignore.

"Are you ready to proceed, master?" Boris asked.

"Yes," Doom nodded. "But this part of the journey I must complete alone."

"Master?" Boris asked.

"First Valeria then Richards," Doom said. "I know all too well who the final face I shall meet will be, and I know exactly where to find her."

"Then Godspeed, master," Boris said. "We will not meet again."

"Thank you, Boris, for all your years of loyal service," Doom told him. "You have the eternal gratitude of D-... of Victor."

Boris nodded in respect and vanished into the night. The trek back to Castle Doom was long and muddy. It was only in doubling back that Doom realized just how far they'd gone. A few miles from Castle Doom, on a lonely, windswept moor, Doom stopped. Just as in the real version of Latveria, a
worn and half-hidden tombstone protruded from the ground. Doom knelt down before it and dusted the moss from the stone surface.

"You knew where to come without a guide," a woman's voice said. "You always were a clever boy."

"A clever boy born to a clever woman," Doom said as he stood and turned to face his companion.

Her dark brown hair and mahogany colored eyes were as beautiful and striking as ever, and she wore the same purple dress she'd worn the day she died. Cynthia von Doom stood only a few feet away, her expression tired but content.

"Mother," Doom whispered under his breath.

"Remove your armor," Cynthia requested. "I wish to look upon my son's face."

Doom could never refuse a request from his mother. He opened the armor's locks and stepped free of it. It closed and stood vigil behind Victor as he approached his mother. Cynthia ran her hand along Victor's face. The fact that Victor shivered at the touch had little to do with how cold Cynthia's hands always were.

"You were always a beautiful boy," Cynthia said. "The scar is indeed an unfortunate mar upon perfection."

"I knew if any would understand, it would be you," Victor said.

"When last I saw you in Mephisto's Realm, I forsook you," Cynthia said regretfully. "My only son."

"You did only that which I knew you would," Victor said. "You acted in accordance to my designs to redeem your soul. By sacrificing your love for me, I saved you. It was a small price to pay for your salvation."

"And what of your soul? Your salvation?" Cynthia asked. "You seek to eternally postpone judgment day by obtaining immortality?"

"Yes," Victor nodded.

"Is it because you never wished to see me again?" Cynthia asked. "Because I forsook you? Did you fear a reunion with me and your father?"

"I- ... That is not...," Victor stuttered, unable to express himself.

"Shh, it's alright, Victor," Cynthia said. "You are at the end of your journey. You have been shown the price of immortality: an eternity of living with painful memories, the possibility of all purpose dying whilst you live on, and an inability to be reunited with those you love. And now you have a choice to make."

Cynthia backed away several paces and held out her hand.

"You can stop now," Cynthia offered. "If you take my hand, you and I can go together to see your father. You can leave the mortal world behind you and rest. But if you do, there will be no returning, and there will be no changing your mind."

A part of Victor desperately wanted to take his mother's hand, to leave behind all the fighting and the struggling for power. After all, if eternal life meant only painful memories and an unfulfilled soul,
then why bother? With just a touch of her hand, he could go and have the family that was torn away
from him in his youth. It all was within his grasp...

But he didn't want it.

Peace had never been a part of Victor's nature. The boy who might have wanted that ending died
long ago. Young Victor was torn apart by the world. Loki was right about the difference between
Doom and Victor, but he was wrong about which one truly still lived. And the one that lived had no
desire to stop living. With or without the armor, he was who he was.

"I came here to obtain immortality," Victor said as he backed away and donned his armor anew.
"And Doom will not leave without his boon."

Surprisingly, Cynthia smiled at that. "Spoken as I knew you would, my son."

The setting changed, and Cynthia and Doom found themselves just beyond the drawbridge into
Castle Doom. The bridge was down, and the castle stood waiting before them.

"This is where we part ways, my son," Cynthia said. "Just beyond that bridge is the immortality you
seek. Once you cross, we will never meet again."

"I do not do this to scorn you, mother," Doom stated.

"I know," she replied. "This is the path you have chosen, and you must see it through. Now go.
Follow it."

Without turning to face his mother, Doom proceeded forward. He flounced his cape dramatically as
he crossed the bridge into his future.

Chapter End Notes

Boris, Valeria, Reed Richards, and Cynthia von Doom are all canon Marvel characters.

The various flashbacks include scenes from Books of Doom #1, Fantastic Four:
Unthinkable Prologue, and Avengers: Emperor Doom.
Hook buttoned up his vest as he exited the secret room behind Jafar's lab. His hook was still coated in Pan's blood from their recent "session" to coax the location of the lamp out of him. Jafar followed soon after.

"We're getting nowhere," Jafar said once he sealed the hidden room. "And I'm growing quite frustrated."

"Is that so?" Hook asked. "Because from where I was standing, you were enjoying yourself down there even more than I was."

"I don't deny that I enjoy our time with the prisoner, but we're no closer to finding the lamp," Jafar replied. "Torture isn't quite doing the trick."

"You're a master of hypnosis," Hook pointed out. "Why not hypnotize the little demon and be done with it?"

"I've been trying," Jafar explained. "He has a remarkable resistance to my powers. I never had to worry about wills that strong dealing with the Sultan."

"Then we're going to have to chart a new course forward," Hook said as he wiped the blood off his hook. "Perhaps the use of the Queen's mirror will suffice."

"She'd take a wish from the lamp as payment," Jafar hissed as his eyes flashed with rage. "Out of the question. You know Pan better than anyone. Where might he have hidden his deepest and darkest treasures?"

"I've no inkling as to where that little- ... Wait," Hook began. "I remember he was hiding something in Skull Rock back in the day. Something important. It must bear some sentimental relevance to him. If he hid the lamp anywhere on Neverland, that's where it'd be."

"Then we shall investigate at once!" Jafar said as he prepared to create a Corridor of Darkness.

"Investigate what exactly?" Ursula asked as she invited herself into the room.

"Nothing that need concern you, sea-witch," Jafar said with a sneer. "Why are you even here?"

"Yours truly has a lead on the second Gem of Cronus," Ursula announced. "And, against her better judgment, Maleficent wants you two along on this mission."

"And why could Maleficent not inform us herself?" Jafar asked. "Are we too beneath the notice of-"

"We graciously appreciate your apprising, and we'll be along momentarily," Hook interrupted as he placed a hand on Jafar's shoulders to hold his boyfriend back.

Ursula nodded and vanished into a Corridor of Darkness, leaving the two alone once again.

"I grow weary of always plotting and scheming to gain more power but never getting the chance to use it!" Jafar bemoaned. "We've been at this Overtakers business for months now, and what have we to show for it? A conquered kingdom without a citizenry to rule."
"A fair deal better than where we both were beforehand," Hook pointed out. "True, we've not made the progress that would have been ideal, but I'm quite content not being kept under Swan's throng or dead."

"Point well taken," Jafar nodded. "Though it occurs to me that I know very little of your time with the Swan girl. And I admit myself curious. What was it that drew you to seek out heroism and a mockery of love in the first place?"

Hook paused for a moment as if deep in thought and straining to grasp at something just out of reach.

"Many... of those memories... those feelings... they're gone," Hook said. "They died when I died. But... I knew that after my revenge, I'd have nothing to look forward to... no purpose. I thought Regina had the right of it: if you don't like the ending, change the story. If villains don't get happy endings, then don't be a villain anymore. Make yourself a hero and take what you want."

"And it didn't work?" Jafar asked.

"No, it did... up to a point," Hook said. "I smiled a certain way, made nice with the right people, lent a helping hand now and then, and suddenly everyone believed I was hero. Soon enough Rumplestiltskin fell off the wagon, and then I got to be justified in my hatred of him as well without having to change a thing or bury any hatchet. It was like a game of pirate's dice. The better I bluffed and controlled what the others saw, the more they sung my praises and made me feel like I belonged."

"But you loved Emma Swan," Jafar said. "Surely you wouldn't have gone to all that trouble if you didn't."

"Aye, I loved her," Hook admitted. "I thought she could be my new purpose after Milah. I thought she could be my new happy ending. I was wrong."

"And do you still have feelings for her?" Jafar probed.

"Of course I still have feelings for her...," Hook said, and for a moment a pang of jealous shot through Jafar's heart. "Feelings like anger, hatred, disappointment. When Maleficent brought me back, she opened my eyes to the fact that in my game of pirate's dice, I somehow convinced even myself of the lie. And now I see Swan for who she truly was: an anchor, a pretty blonde distraction. She held me back from getting what I wanted."

"Then she truly was worthless," Jafar remarked, with a certain pep back in his words at hearing that. "You're far better off with those who will never hold you back from what you want, who'll never force you to behave a certain way to be accepted."

"And being in close proximity to a certain incredibly handsome someone is quite the perk," Hook added.

"Hmm, I suppose there is that," Jafar said coyly. "Though I'm not completely sure who you mean. Describe this certain someone to me."

Hook smirked at the game. "Well he's tall. Dark. Well dressed."

"And what else?" Jafar asked as a matching smirk crept onto his face.

"I love his eyebrows, they're so expressive," Hook continued as he slowly closed the gap between himself and Jafar. "And those cute little gaps between his teeth."
Jafar’s grin was practically devilish by now. "Go on."

"And his beard is so... twisted," Hook said as he tussled the beard with his hook. "He's stolen my heart."

"And the Swan girl?" Jafar asked as he pulled Hook in close and pressed their hips together.

"What Swan girl?" Hook replied as he allowed his lips to graze Jafar's.

Unable to resist the temptation any further, Jafar and Hook kissed. Jafar, as ever, fought for dominance in the kiss. Hook matched Jafar's force at first before ultimately succumbing to his lover's dominance and allowing Jafar to take control.

"Ahem."

Jafar and Hook pulled apart and turned to face the source of the noise. Ursula was standing across the room with her arms crossed.

"I thought you said you'd be along momentarily?" Ursula asked.

"Apologies, m'lady," Hook said before Jafar had a chance to shout at her. "We're coming."

"That better not have been a double entendre," Ursula said with a sneer as she turned to leave the lab once more.

Once she was out of earshot, the two exchanged a glance and couldn't help but laugh.

"You know," Jafar said. "I'm beginning to think Loki and Doom had the right idea with their little hideaway mansion...."

Hook grinned. "That's why we have the Jolly Roger."

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Ardyn and Amora sat on opposite sides of a white iron garden table underneath a big green umbrella that shaded them from the sun. They’d set up their little table in the middle of a clear, grassy area just outside of the tropical jungle. Both were sporting sun hats and large sunglasses as they casually sipped lemonade whilst enjoying the breeze.

"I must admit, Amora, you were quite correct," Ardyn said. "Setting up the table on this side of the jungle was a much more fitting location."

"Did I not tell you?" Amora asked as she sipped her lemonade. "The light is better, the breeze comes at a nicer angle, and we've a clear view of our surroundings."

"A perfect day to be outside as well," Ardyn added. "I'm so glad we decided to do this."

"It is indeed most peaceful," Amora said with a pleasant sigh as they allowed the niceness of the moment to wash over them.

That was when the giant crocodile-like head landed right in front of them with a powerful rumble. Amora peered out at it over her sunglasses.

"I see the first of the boys have already returned," Amora remarked.

Skurge emerged from the jungle, carrying the decapitated corpse of a sacrosuchus that he then laid next to its severed head. His battle-axe was still red with blood. Even being a bulky and muscular
man, Skurge was comparatively only about the size of the creature's head.

"Ha HA! None may challenge the might of Skurge the Executioner!" Skurge boasted.

Amora applauded. "T'is most impressive, Skurge."

"I would not be so quick to laude his achievement, Enchantress," Ardyn said as he gestured towards the jungle.

Russell Edgington emerged holding up an immense titanoboa knotted up into a ball and dripping blood from its mouth. Even balled up as it was, Ardyn could tell that the beast must've been at least forty feet long when it was alive. Russell balanced the dead monster on his index finger and spun it around as if it were a basketball.

"None may challenge the might of who now?" Russell asked as he cupped his ear to hear the praise.

"I see you found one of Jafar's relatives," Ardyn joked, earning a giggle from Amora.

"Bah! A snake is nothing compared to the beast I conquered!" Skurge huffed. "And mine will make a far more suitable trophy."

"Oh don't be so obstinate," Russell said. "Mine'll make a fine trophy... once I untangled it, that is. It's the biggest fuckin' snake I've ever seen... well the second biggest."

Russell shot a wink at his companions who rolled their eyes at the innuendo.

"Blackheart still has not returned," Amora noticed.

"It is growing a tad late," Ardyn remarked. "Perhaps he was horribly mangled by some other prehistoric beast?"

"I will accept the perilous task of combing the jungle for him," Skurge volunteered.

"Oh puh-lease," Russell remarked. "I could scan this entire continent in the time it would take you to check that jungle."

"I will not have you questioning my competency, vampire!" Skurge growled, holding up his axe menacingly.

"I wasn't questionin' your competency, Skurge," Russell replied. "I was denyin' its existence."

"WHY YOU-

"Shh, shh, do you hear that?" Ardyn asked.

"Been hearin' it for the past ten minutes, but I figured I'd let him make an entrance," Russell replied.

The sound of titanic footprints shook the area. Amora had to use her magic to hold her lemonade glasses in place to avoid them tipping over. With a great crashing sound, a dark brown tyrannosaurus rex came bursting through the trees with Blackheart riding on the creature's back as if it were a bull in a rodeo. Blackheart was laughing maniacally as he forced the beast to buck and stumble around to free itself of the pest attached to its back.

"What a show pony," Skurge grumbled.

Blackheart did a backflip over the t-rex's head and landed on the ground in front of the dinosaur. The
t-rex roared in anger and attempted to lash out with its sharp teeth. Blackheart slid away from the attack and stopped just under the dinosaur's stomach. With a leap powered by dark magic, Blackheart propelled himself through the t-rex's chest and ripped its heart clean out of its body through the other side.

Blackheart popped the heart like a water balloon, causing it to rain blood over himself and the creature as the t-rex collapsed to the ground with such a force that it caused Amora and Ardyn's table to topple over. Blackheart slid down the dinosaur's neck and landed next to its head.

"And he sticks the landing! Thank you, hold your applause," Blackheart announced with a demonic cackle.

"I think Blackheart had the most impressive kill," Ardyn remarked.

"You like? I'm calling him Sharptooth," Blackheart said.

"Why are you naming your kill? What's the point?" Skurge asked with a grunt of disgust.

Blackheart grabbed "Sharptooth's" jaws and began to move them as if he were a puppet whilst putting on a fake dinosaur inspired voiced. "The point is that Skurge is a little bitch, and also I'm Sharptooth and I like to fuck pretty ponies and then eat them!"

"Pretty sure dinosaurs can't talk," Russell remarked. "What would they even say? Something like... Rawr... I'm a t-rex... I dunno."

"See now that's blatant dinosaur racism," Blackheart scolded in his own natural voice.

"Oh come now, Skurge," Amora cooed when she noticed her bodyguard skulking off the side. "Yours was a most impressive kill, regardless. The skull will look marvelous on my wall."

That seemed to lift Skurge's mood considerably.

"I hate that Steve couldn't join us," Russell bemoaned. "All that time cooped up in Radiant Garden isn't healthy for a vampire."

"Oh please, he's a dreadful wet blanket," Amora said. "He has a stick shoved so far up his posterior that I have to wonder how there's any room for you during fornication."

Blackheart and Ardyn got a good laughed at that; Russell found it considerably less amusing.

"He's not a wet blanket," Russell argued. "This election comin' up just has him all stressed out. He'll be back to my normal charmin' boyfriend once this is all said and done."

"If he hasn't totally lost interest in you by then," Amora suggested without looking up from her careful examination of her fingernails.

"If you've got somethin' to say then say it," Russell said through gritted teeth.

"If I had something more to say, I would have said it," Amora remarked. "Simply be wary of the fickle attention span of paramours. I've left many a man heartbroken in my wake because he simply did not recognize that I had already moved on."

Skurge seemed to twitch at that remark but said nothing.

"Besides I saw him running off somewhere with Daken yesterday," Amora said. "Daken is a great deal more fair of face than you, Russell."
"Yeah, well, Steve's not a whore like you, so I think I'm just fine," Russell said with venom in his voice. "And at any rate, I don't know why the fuck this prehistoric planet has mosquitos, but they're the size of nickels and they're drivin' me up the fuckin' wall. I'm going back to the castle."

Russell vanished into a Corridor of Darkness, leaving his trophy behind. Everyone knew that it wasn't truly the mosquitos that drove Russell away.

Ardyn sighed. "Well that was almost a pleasant afternoon."

---

Hook and Jafar were apparently the last two to arrive in the conference room. Six others were already standing around. Pete and Winnie Sanderson were very obviously trying to stay on opposite sides of the room from each other. Everyone knew that they'd gotten into a fight over Mary the other day, and it was clear that no reconciliation had occurred since. Hades and Maleficent were standing in the center of the room, conversing with Ursula and a woman that neither Hook nor Jafar recognized.

The unfamiliar woman was black and wore her hair in dreadlocks. Her dress was tattered and ragged but still adorned with seashells and beads of every color. Though she had a mortal appearance, both men could feel a certain power radiating off of her that felt wild and untamable. Hook strangely felt comforted by her presence as if she were an old friend. The unfamiliar woman turned to gaze at Hook and Jafar, and when Hook and the woman's eyes locked, she broke into a smile and crossed the room over to him.

"Them eyes tell a story," the woman said, never breaking eye-contact. "I wonder how that story going to unfold."

Hook smiled and laughed awkwardly as she invaded his personal space. "A... um... pleasure to meet you, Miss..."

"Boys this is Calypso," Ursula offered as she slithered over. "An old friend of the family. She taught my mother everything she knew about sea-witchcraft."

"Calypso as in the sea nymph who detained Odysseus?" Jafar asked with fascination in his voice.

"Sea goddess," Calypso corrected. "And we don't need to speak of Odysseus here. Whate'er stories you've been told don't necessarily be true."

Calypso being a sea goddess explained why Hook felt so at ease by her presence. Hook had been away from the sea for far too long, and his heart ached to sail the Jolly Roger once more. On the other hand, Hook had no explanation for Calypso's strange remarks about his eyes, and the question nagged at the back of his mind.

"Calypso has graciously offered her assistance in locating the second Gem of Cronus," Maleficent explained.

"My father was the titan Atlas," Calypso explained. "Zeus in all his cruelty forced my father to forever hold up the sky 'bove his precious home world. You want to hurt Zeus? I be more than happy to help."

"A titan's daughter?" Jafar asked. "And how can we trust that you're not working for Cronus as well."

Hook gave Jafar a nudge in the side, but he didn't backtrack. Calypso, however, didn't seem offended and just smiled.
"My father was loyal to Cronus," Calypso said. "Look where that got him. All the same, I cannot openly defy the Titan King. Lines drawn in the sand by destiny long ago have not yet been washed away by the sea. I can only give you a head start to the gem, which I do because Ursula and Hades are old friends. And because... of other reasons."

"And what might those reasons be?" Hook asked, having the distinct feeling that Calypso was talking about him.

The sea goddess simply shook her head. "That story will unfold when the time comes. Be patient, Killian Jones."

A shiver ran down Hook's spine at the mention of his real name. It'd been a while since anyone had called him by it. "Hook" had all but completely replaced it. Hearing Calypso know and speak his name without an introduction felt like being suddenly plunged into ice water.

"We shall be travelling to a world that Calypso knows well," Maleficent explained. "A world of pirates. That is why I personally requested you, Hook. I think it is time that the Jolly Roger resumed its terrorizing of the seven seas."

All thoughts of his name were quickly pushed aside, and Hook smiled. "Thank you, m'lady. I've been looking forward to this for some time."

"Pete has been to this world once before," Maleficent explained. "And thus he shall act as our guide."

"This world's got some dark and creepy magic," Pete said. "There was this pirate named Barbossa whose whole crew turned into freaky skeletons in the moonlight. 'course, he's deader than a doornail now."

"Barbossa yet lives," Calypso warned. "But he might be less inclined to help you this time. You'll need to make other allies."

"I had hoped that Luxord would accompany us," Maleficent said. "He knows the Caribbean well. However, I've had difficulty getting into contact with him or any of the other former Nobodies."

"Eh, probably just as well," Hades said. "Never did trust those guys. Look how well things turned out with Demyx."

"Well that explains what some of us are doing here," Jafar said with a sneer. "Though why, pray tell, were Winifred and I chosen to come along on this quest?"

"Winifred's aptitude for necromancy and demonic witchcraft should prove to be a valuable asset in a world where the undead sail," Maleficent explained. "And as for you, I had thought you of all people would have jumped at the opportunity to uncover long lost treasure."

Jafar remained skeptical of Maleficent's motives but kept silent.

"These charts will lead you to the gem," Calypso said as she handed Maleficent a roll of parchment. "But know this: the Fist of Ability, like the Fist of Might can only be found at the right time. Thus you will need to take this."

Calypso held in her hands a locket. It was crab shaped and tarnished with age, but a face could still be made out on its surface. Hades took the locket and examined it, clearly not sure what to make of it.
"Thanks, Calypso," Hades said with uncertainty in his voice.

"That be all the help I can offer," Calypso explained. "Do with it what ye will."

With her gifts given, Calypso's body vanished, leaving behind a pool of salt water and a pile of white stone crabs.

Chapter End Notes

I took some artistic license as to which prehistoric creatures existed at the same time for the purposes of the hunting scene. I don't have a specific fandom in mind for that world. Could be from any dinosaur franchise you particularly enjoy.

Calypso and the next world we're heading to are from the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise. Timeline wise, the story is set post-At World's End. Events akin to Kingdom Hearts 3’s visit to the Caribbean will have roughly taken place during Quite a Glittering Assemblage.

Calypso's backstory as the daughter of Atlas comes from Greek Mythology.
Hook set the Jolly Roger down gently in the Caribbean waters. No other ships were in sight and the cover of nightfall kept the Overtakers' arrival hidden from view. Maleficent set up a table on the ship's deck with Calypso's charts sprawled out, and the other six Overtakers gathered around her to study the maps.

"According to the charts, our gem is located on an island known as Isle de Muerte," Maleficent explained. "It is said to be impossible to find except by those who already know where it is."

Pete chuckled loudly. "And lucky for us, Barbossa showed me right where it was last time I was here! So we can get 'round that lil' parlor trick."

Maleficent enchanted a green emblem to hover over the map to indicate the Jolly Roger's current position.

"So if we're here," Hook said, gesturing to the marker. "We should be able to arrive in just under a day's time if the wind holds."

"A **day**? As in a full twenty-four hours?" Hades asked.

"That's actually rather good time," Hook said. "I've been on many a voyage that required a month or more at sea."

Hades made a disgusted sound. "How do you mortals live such short lives and deal with such long waits? Oy vey! Memo to memo: never take teleportation for granted again."

"Well strap in, mates!" Hook called out. "It seems some of us have a long ride ahead of us."

"A little ore to the left," Amora directed.

"Yes, m'lady," Skurge said as he shifted the position of the taxidermied sacrosuchus.

"Mmm, no, I think I actually prefer lighting on it over there," Amora said as she gestured to the other corner of the room.

Skurge huffed but obeyed, as he always did, carrying the immense trophy to the other end of Amora's sitting room. Loki strolled into the room and cocked his eyebrow at the sight.

"I should have known it was only a matter of time before Skurge arrived," Loki remarked. "Still taking every menial order you give for a chance to sniff your panties, Amora?"

"I don't recall giving you leave to enter my chambers whenever you pleased, Laufeyson," Amora said. "I am in the middle of some rather exhausting and important work."

Skurge set the trophy down where Amora had directed and gestured to it with a prideful smile.

"Mmm, no, the space between the trophy and the duvet is too narrow," Amora remarked. "T'would be more likely that I would sustain an injury trying to walk past it."
Skurge's face dropped at the prospect of moving the trophy once again.
"Yes, Amora, you must be conscious of how fat you've grown," Loki teased.

Amora scowled at Loki's remark. "On second thought, Skurge, that walk-way is plenty wide for my petite hips."

Skurge sighed with relief and thanked Loki with his eyes.
"You're too easy, Enchantress," Loki said with a laugh.

"Are you here merely to bask in my beauty or did you come with a purpose?" Amora asked.

"As a matter of fact, your beauty is my purpose," Loki said. "You see-"

"Knock, knock," Blackheart interrupted as he invited himself into the room.

"Are my chambers the new common room?" Amora asked with exasperation.

"I'll be out of your silky blonde hair in just a minute," Blackheart said. "Have any of you guys seen a titan walk by? Silver hair, wearing armor with a lot of skulls on it, something in Greek like ὘ρισμότητα carved into his breast-plate, yay big?"

Blackheart stood on his tippy-toes and held up his arm to approximate the titan's height. Amora, Skurge, and Loki simply looked at him in disbelief.

"I'll take that as a no," Blackheart said with a sigh as he slumped out of the chambers.

"... I'm worried about him," Skurge said once Blackheart was out of earshot.

"Nevermind that," Loki said. "As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted, I was passing through the common room a moment ago, and I happened to notice an apple that was left on the table. It had the words 'For the Fairest' carved into it. Naturally, I thought of you straight away and thought to inform you so that you might claim it."

Amora sneered. "Likely a trap planted by that fool queen seeking to bait me into eternal slumber."

"Perhaps so, but who's to say you must eat the apple to claim it?" Loki asked. "After all, can you truly afford to allow any other woman to claim it first and call themselves more fair than thee?"

"Amora is the fairest of them all," Skurge boasted. "She has little need for such trivial things to grant her that which she already possesses. Why-"

"Be silent Skurge," Amora said. "The Laufeyson has a point. The apple belongs to me, and why should I allow that which is rightfully mine to be taken by another?"

Loki smirked as Amora strutted out of her chambers. Thank goodness she never took the time to read The Judgment of Paris.

Fish Mooney walked down the halls of the Eminence Palace for the first time in weeks. Her work establishing a power base in Gotham and returning Penguin to power was so far a smashing success. Penguin had the resources and the clout to fill the power vacuum in Gotham without too much bloodshed. But one simple truth was becoming apparent to Fish: Penguin didn't need her anymore. He was no longer her umbrella boy in need of a mother figure's guiding hand. He'd grown into the supervillain she always knew he could become.
Penguin never spurned Fish's help or made her feel unwanted, but it was all too clear that he and the Riddler had Gotham under control. They were still more than happy to share their influence with her, but Fish knew where she wasn't needed. That was why the news of Demyx's betrayal and death struck her as hard as it did. One boy she thought of as a son didn't need her, and the other never truly was a son to her. As much as Fish loved power for her own sake, there was just something infinitely more satisfying bringing a new villain into being. Fish couldn't deny that she felt a bit lost without a young villain to nurture.

Fish crossed the threshold into Grimhilde's mirror chamber where, as usual, Grimhilde was found scrying into the mirror. Cruella was sitting on a couch on the other side of the room, playing some game on her phone. Fish cleared her throat to make her presence known.

"Fish Mooney," Grimhilde said cordially as she turned around. "I see you have returned from your exploits in Gotham. I trust all is well."

"Quite well," Fish affirmed. "So well, in fact, it's like they don't even need me."

"That is most fortuitous then," Grimhilde said, her tone growing harsher. "For now you can focus your energies on the greater scope of the Overtakers. Perhaps next time you recruit a wayward child, you can confirm that no enemy of ours holds possession of his heart."

Fish glared unblinkingly at Grimhilde. "Do you have something you wanna say to me Grimhilde?"

"Simply that the Organization miscreant that you adopted kidnapped me," Grimhilde said. "And were I you, I would be most careful with regards to how you proceed."

"You'd have to be a lousy excuse for a sorceress to get captured by Demyx of all people," Fish said. "It's a wonder Maleficent kept you around after that display of weakness."

Grimhilde's eyes flashed with rage, and she was about to respond when Loki entered the chamber.

"Do pardon my intrusion, ladies," Loki said as he strolled over. "Ah, Fish, good to see you've returned."

"What do you want, trickster?" Grimhilde asked.

"I was passing through the common room a moment ago," Loki replied, "and I happened to notice an apple that was left on the table. It had the words 'For the Fairest' carved into it. Naturally, I thought of you straight away and thought to inform you so that you might claim it."

"No doubt a taunt from that Enchantress woman," Grimhilde sneered. "Her former connection to the Golden Apples of Idunn is well known. If she means to bait me into claiming a fruit I cannot eat to prove some foolhardy point, I have no interest in playing her game."

"Perhaps so, but who's to say you must eat the apple to claim it?" Loki asked. "After all, can you truly afford to allow any other woman to claim it first and call themselves more fair than thee?"

"Oh please, Grimmie is the Fairest One of All," Cruella said, looking up from her phone. "The mirror says it all the time, doesn't it darling?"

Grimhilde's deafening silence answered that question for Loki.

"Perhaps I shall claim the apple after all," Grimhilde declared. "It would not do to have another take that which is mine."
Grimhilde stormed out of the room quickly. Cruella, not wanting to be left alone with Loki and Fish, quickly followed after her girlfriend.

"You're terrible," Fish said to Loki once the other two women were out of earshot. "You're going to start a war in our base of operations."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Loki said with a devious smirk.

"Mhmm, sure ya don't," Fish said, unable to suppress her own smile.

"If I knew what you were talking about, then I'd have also known that redirecting her anger onto another would spare you considerable trouble," Loki said coyly. "And I'd also know that now you've free reign to use the mirror without having to ask Grimhilde to do it for you."

Loki winked and vanished into a Corridor of Darkness, leaving Fish alone with the Magic Mirror. Fish took a deep breath and approached the looking glass.

"Slave in the Magic Mirror, come from the farthest space," Fish chanted. "Through wind and darkness, I summon thee."

A powerful gust of wind filled the room, causing Fish's coat to flutter around about her.

"Speak!" she ordered. "Let me see thy face."

The mirror filled with flames, and when the fires subsided, a ghostly face was left staring at her from the other side.

"Alas, Fish Mooney, though my sight is best," the spirit of the mirror said. "I give answers only at the queen's behest."

At first, Fish resigned to the belief that this had just been a waste of time, but then an idea occurred to her. Fish rested her hand against the mirror's surface and willed her toxin to seep into the mirror itself. Though the spirit was immune at first, the magic Ursula had taught Fish ensured that ultimately he would succumb to her will.

"What wouldst thou know, master?" the mirror asked, changing his tone entirely.

Fish took a deep breath and made her request. "Magic mirror, search everything, find me a young villain to take under my wing."

"I AM A TITAN!" Iapetus protested as he was hoisted back into hanging upside down in the dungeon. "I ONCE RULED THE UNIVERSE ALONGSIDE MY BROTHER! I WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS!"

"Yes you will," Blackheart said as he finished cranking Iapetus higher. "Because you were a naughty boy who tried to run away again."

"I AM NOT SOME MONGREL MUTT," Iapetus insisted. "I WILL NOT BE TREATED AS SUCH!"

"Yes you will," Blackheart said, giving Iapetus a playful shove.

"Blackheart, there you are!" Ardyn said as he entered the room. "I've been to-... That is a titan. Why is there a titan here? And, for that matter, how did you-"
"Catch him?" Blackheart offered. "Easy, really. Iapetus here is a moron."

"I AM NOT A-"

"Yes you are," Blackheart interrupted. "Anyone who was actually intelligent would have fled back to Cronus's side the moment they escaped. Instead, you hung around the city trying to cast a curse of everlasting death over this entire world."

"... He tried to cast what now?" Ardyn asked.

"Don't worry, I stopped him," Blackheart assured his ally. "But unfortunately, he's been especially difficult to interrogate. I've been torturing him for weeks, and he hasn't yet let slip any of Cronus's secrets."

"I AM NOT PRIVY TO CRONUS'S SECRETS!" Iapetus roared.

"I still don't believe you," Blackheart said with a scowl.

"Permit me to offer a solution," Ardyn chimed in. "I have the power to absorb the memories of others. I can peak into our dear titan's mind and extract the knowledge you seek."

"Be my guest," Blackheart shrugged.

Ardyn summoned up his power and placed the palm of his hand against Iapetus's forehead. Images flashed in Ardyn's head of Iapetus escaping Tartarus, going to a ritzy spa for an extended stay, and being captured by Blackheart, but Ardyn found the titan's memory completely devoid of anything connected to Cronus since the breakout.

"I'm afraid we're at a dead-end," Ardyn said. "He knows nothing of Cronus's plans."

Blackheart gasped as if he was scandalized. "Iapetus, why didn't you just tell me that from the beginning?"

"YOU WILL SUFFER A THOUSAND PAINFUL DEATHS," Iapetus threatened.

"As kinky as that sounds, I'm gonna have to pass," Blackheart said.

"How disappointing," Ardyn said. "That would be a kink I'd most like to witness."

"For you I could make an exception," Blackheart said with a wink.

"Master!" Sarah Sanderson called out as she skipped into the room. "Thou hast promised me that thou wouldst inspect my flesh this evening!"

Ardyn couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy seeing Sarah shamelessly rubbing her body all over Blackheart's. This wasn't helped by the fact that Blackheart's hands seemed to be taking a tour of the inside of her blouse.

"Well my naughty, naughty witch," Blackheart teased, "I'll have to test you for the devil's mark by shoving my bodkin into your flesh."

Sarah giggled at that in anticipation.

"Why do I suddenly have the urge to bathe?" Ardyn asked with a chuckle.

Ardyn was secretly very thankful when the doors to the dungeon opened and Loki entered.
"Ah! There you are, Sarah!" Loki said as if he'd been looking for Sarah all day. "I have something most important to tell you."

"Oh?" Sarah asked as she peeled herself off of Blackheart. "What dost thou wish of me?"

"I was passing through the common room a moment ago," Loki said, relaying the same tale he'd now already told twice, "and I happened to notice an apple that was left on the table. It had the words 'For the Fairest' carved into it. Naturally, I thought of you straight away and thought to inform you so that you might claim it."

"Like the Judgment of Paris?" Sarah asked.

"Umm... yes," Loki said, taken aback by her response. "How did you of all the women here know the reference?"

"T'was my favorite bedtime story in mine girlhood!" Sarah declared. "A contest of beauty that incited a horrific and bloody war? T'is the stuff of dreams!"

"Then how about you go run off and make those dreams come true?" Loki suggested. "It awaits you in the common room."

Sarah gave Blackheart a quick peck on the lips before skipping off giddily towards the golden apple.

"You are such a bad boy," Blackheart said to Loki. "Makes me wish I'd thought of it first."

"Even after all this time, you still turn to mischief," Ardyn remarked.

"No," Loki said, shaking his head. "Mischief is a small thing. A toy I've used well and discarded. This isn't mischief. This is mayhem."

Loki bowed dramatically and vanished from the room, leaving Blackheart and Ardyn alone with Iapetus once again.

"Just watch," his voice echoed even after he had gone.

"Hope Sarah punches those other bitches in the nose," Blackheart said with a laugh.

"Soooo, I gathered that you and Ms. Sanderson have quite an active sexual life," Ardyn remarked. "I take it then that those blush-worthy remarks you made with regards to the two of us were nothing more than remarks."

"Hmm? Why would they be?" Blackheart asked. "Sarah and I aren't exclusive."

"You aren't?" Ardyn asked.

"Naw, that's just a prima nocta thing," Blackheart said. "Prince of Hell gets to fuck whatever subjects he wants. Though she actually enjoys it and keeps coming back for more."

Ardyn sighed. "Prima nocta? Really?"

Blackheart shrugged. "Hey, it's Hell. No one ever said it was a nice place with upstanding morals."

"Fair enough," Ardyn said. "Though I must admit I'm relieved to hear that your interests in Ms. Sanderson are casual and noncommittal. Because, to be honest, the vulgar things you say are quite... enticing in their own disturbing way, and I admit myself rather interested in putting those words into action."
Blackheart smirked. "So, basically, you want me to fuck you until your eyes roll back in your head
and you start vomiting pea soup?"

"To put it in layman's terms, yes," Ardyn said.

"See, you say that now," Blackheart replied, "but I'm one Hell of a lot to deal with. You prepared to
be with a demon?"

"It wouldn't be my first time with a demon inside of me," Ardyn remarked. "I'm sure I could stand to
have a little more demon."

Blackheart laughed. "Baby, there's nothing 'little more' about me."

Iapetus grunted in disgust.

"Perhaps our dear titanic guest would fancy a show?" Ardyn suggested.

"NO, I WOULD N-"

"Good idea," Blackheart said with a cackle.

Ardyn pulled Blackheart into a kiss, and the demon prince immediately slipped a forked tongue past
Ardyn's lips. There was a dangerous feeling when kissing Blackheart that practically set Ardyn's
heart on fire. He'd spent thousands of years with the Starscourge inside of him, and now it was gone
forever thanks to Noct. As much as Ardyn tried to deny it, he missed that dark and demonic energy,
and kissing Blackheart made him feel just a little bit closer that powerful ecstasy.

"WOULD YOU TWO GET A ROOM?" Iapetus roared in anger.

As per Flydor's instructions on Imperious's behalf, Steve and Daken made their way to Imperious's
home world, the world of the Power Rangers. They arrived in a cosmopolitan metropolis known as
New Tech City that acted as a center of commerce for many of the planets in this part of the
universe. Extraterrestrials of every variety wandered the streets alongside humans, and technology
seemed to thrive on every street corner.

"It's practically utopia," Daken said as he and Steve strolled up to the weapons testing facility
Imperious pointed them towards. "Aliens and humans living side by side and coexisting? That could
never happen in my world."

"Reminds me of the type of place my dad said America would become if we didn't do 'something'
about 'foreigners,'" Steve said. "... My dad was not a good man."

"Mine neither," Daken admitted.

Steve rang the bell, and they were quickly buzzed into the building. Steve and Daken stepped into
the dimly lit facility and were greeted by the sight of two strange looking extraterrestrials. The first
was a short and wrinkly alien who looked to be some kind of scientist; Steve could make out the
name Professor Cerebros on his security badge. The second figure was someone who looked to be
more akin to the type of person Imperious would be involved with. His head seemed to be that of a
white bat suspended in a glass tank, and he wore a long black cloak with a red necktie worn over it.

"I take it you're Imperious's stooges he told me about?" the bat-like alien asked.

"Oh, baby, I'm not anyone's stooge," Daken remarked.
Steve sighed and stepped in front of Daken. "We're here on his behalf. I'm Steve Newlin. This is Daken."

"I am Broodwing," the alien introduced himself. "And let's keep this quick. Gruumm has been breathing down my neck lately about my side deals."

"Oh, he's not going to like this one bit," Cerebros said with a groan as he fiddled with some machines.

"Don't be a coward, professor," Broodwing instructed. "I'm paying you handsomely for this."

"What exactly is all of this?" Steve asked. "Imperious was a little stingy with the details."

Broodwing groaned at this waste of time. "I'm opening you a portal to the Shadow World, the final resting place of all the souls of monsters that have had the unfortunate luck of crossing paths with the Power Rangers. You two are to enter and retrieve that which Imperious desires."

"Which is what exactly?" Steve asked.

"How should I know?" Broodwing asked. "He's insufferably cryptic! I assume he has a particular dead warrior to bring back to the living realm."

"So we've gotta retrieve some soul whose identity we don't even know?" Daken asked. "That about sums it up?"

"Flydor did leave me with a message I didn't understand before," Steve said. "He said to remind a tiger that he can't change his stripes."

"That'll be your riddle to figure out, not mine," Broodwing said. "We need to send you off quickly before Gruumm starts to get suspicious. Oh and a fair warning: the Shadow World is filled with powerful villains from the past who won't hesitate to destroy you. Last I heard Dark Specter and Mesogog were going to war over territory as if the territory in that place even matters. You'll want to steer clear of that."

"We're ready to go," Cerebros said. "You'll have twenty-four hours to return to the exact spot we beamed you down to. If you're not there in time, you'll be trapped in the Shadow World forever."

"Oh goody, this sounds fun," Daken remarked.

Professor Cerebros flipped the switch, and in a flash of purple light, Steve and Daken vanished from the room.

Doom blinked himself awake and found himself staring, not at the ceiling of his laboratory, but, rather, the canopy of his and Loki's bed in Chateau d'Onterre. He was no longer wearing his armor. In fact, he was no longer wearing anything but a pair of black boxers. Doom yawned and mused that Loki must've brought him to bed after he passed out in the lab. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep, but he felt refreshed and invigorated. Was that a sign that the dei-forming had worked?

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey," a voice said.

The voice made the hair on the back of Doom's neck stand at attention, and though he couldn't immediately place its source, he instantly knew it to be a voice that did not belong in his bedroom. Doom bolted upright to see an altogether too amused figure holding a tray of food in front of him.
"Imshael, the demon," Doom said in recognition.

"Hey, hey, CHOICE. SPIRIT," Imshael corrected, his face contorting with frustration. "Do I go around calling you Victor even though you prefer Doom? No, I do not, and I expect the same courtesy."

Doom, however, didn't seem to listen. He threw the blankets off of himself and rose to his feet. In a shimmer of magic, his armor manifested itself around him.

"You have exactly one minute before I incinerate you. Explain your presence here," Doom ordered. "I warded this estate against demonic presence. How did you get in?"

Imshael set the tray of breakfast down on the bed and grinned. "Perhaps your warding against demons didn't work because, and I apologize if I have been too subtle on this point, I. AM. NOT. A. DEMON. Perhaps you've heard of the Forbidden Ones before?"

"I recall a reference made in one of the books in my library," Doom said. "Four ancient spirits who taught the first mages the art of Blood Magic. I have reason to suspect that they are four of the Great Old Ones."

"Oooh, aren't you the clever one," Imshael remarked. "Well, that's me. Well... okay, I'm not all four. That would just be silly. But I am indeed one of the four Forbidden Ones, and you're quite right about my connection to the Old Ones. That means a piss ant human like you couldn't even kill me if you tried. So let's drop the bravado, shall we?"

"If you're indeed one of the Old Ones then why did you need me to tell you of the existence of other worlds?" Doom asked, suspicious of Imshael's claims. "Surely such rudimentary knowledge is not beyond the grasp of an Old One."

Imshael got a chuckle at that. "Of course not, but that's never what our original deal was about for me. You chose to divulge information to me in exchange for a small fragment of lyrium that ultimately did you no good. Such a curious choice and a very telling one at that."

Doom didn't allow his shock at facing an Old One to show, but, in truth, the prospect that he'd encountered one of the oldest and most powerful cosmic entities of darkness made him slightly uneasy. He didn't fully understand what Imshael had gained by witnessing him and Loki choosing to divulge information, but Doom knew enough about magic to know that strange prices could be extracted indirectly.

"You never answered my earlier question," Doom said, trying to steer the topic back in his favor.

"Cheeky, aren't you?" Imshael asked with a laugh. "Well, you know how much I love choices, and your ultimate choice regarding your mortality is one that had me on the edge of my seat. I simply had to see you up close and personal after making it."

"Then I succeeded?" Doom asked. "I am truly immortal?"

"That's the choice you made, wasn't it?" Imshael reiterated. "Choice to give up mommy and daddy for eternal life. What a fine and interesting choice."

"You mock me," Doom accused.

"On the contrary," Imshael replied. "I admire you. Most mortals are frustratingly sentimental when it comes to their parents. I thought for sure when I threw your mommy at you that you'd cave. But you held firm to your initial choice. That takes true strength."
Doom's blood ran cold. "When you threw my mother at me?"

"Did I fail to mention that tiny detail?" Imshael asked. "Silly me. Right, well, here's the thing, when you tell this story to others, you're probably going to choose to delude yourself into thinking that I sabotaged this scheme the same way that you blame Richards for the scar. But the truth is that one of your runes was wrong, you mixed three types of incompatible magics, and it killed you dead. Now wouldn't that be an anticlimactic end to one who provided so many interesting choices? So I salvaged your soul and your body and decided I'd let you choose whether or not you actually wanted to die or live forever, knowing full and well the consequences of that choice. You chose immortality, so I granted you immortality."

The silence afterward was such that a pin dropping could be heard in the room.

"Foul... wretched... LYING DEMON!" Doom growled as he struggled to make sense of what he'd just been told.

"See now, I knew you'd choose to be delusional," Imshael teased. "But you know I'm telling the truth, deep down. Your immortality came from me. You're welcome. Think about it this way: you never have to eat another Golden Apple again, which is a good thing because they always give me the runs when I eat them."

"GET OUT!" Doom bellowed. "GET. OUT. NOW!"

"Fine, I'll go," Imshael relented. "But do try and eat something. You've been sleeping like the dead for forty-eight hours."

As Imshael vanished from the room, Doom slumped down onto the bed, his mind racing to make sense of everything that had just transpired.

Chapter End Notes

Broodwing and Professor Cerebros are from Power Rangers SPD. The Power Rangers world is also currently set during the time period of SPD, meaning that Mystic Force, Imperious's season, happened twenty years ago in that world's timeline.
Amora arrived in the common room to find the golden apple right where Loki said it would be. The torchlight glistened off the apple as if a glowing amber shape was dancing across the fruit's surface without a care in the world. In ornate lettering "For the Fairest" was carved into it, yet the carving did not seem to have damaged the apple at all. On the contrary, the lettering looked like an engraving that a fine jeweler might have imprinted onto a golden ring. Amora reached out to claim the apple when-

"Halt harlot!" Grimhilde's voice commanded, causing Amora to instinctively draw back her hand. "You'll not claim that which rightfully belongs to me!"

Amora crossed her arms as Grimhilde entered the room with a look of fire in her eyes.

"The apple's engraving clearly states 'For the Fairest'," Amora explained. "It does not say 'For the Most Wrinkled.' A simple mistake to make with your ancient eyesight."

"You dare speak to me in such a way!" Grimhilde gasped. "You will pay most dearly for your insolence! The apple is mine by right!"

"No! T'is MINE!" Sarah said confidently as she ran into the room.

"It is for the fairest," Grimhilde said with a sigh, "not for the biggest trollop. Go find some new boy to fornicate with whilst the Enchantress and I settle this ordeal amongst ourselves."

"It is amusing that either of you mortals think your beauty to be on the level of a goddess," Amora remarked. "Delusional, yet humorous all the same."

"Ooh, thou shalt not insult us so, Amora!" Sarah warned. "Thine golden locks pale in comparison to mine!"

"You're bringing up that ratty bird's nest you call hair?" Grimhilde asked.

"Perhaps you shouldn't throw stones, your majesty," Amora suggested. "After all, she is not the one with hair so hideous that she hides it away from the view of others!"

"Hair is but a crutch to hide facial imperfections," Grimhilde explained. "I allow the beauty of my face to speak for itself without hiding behind such a simple illusion."

Skurge, Cruella, Blackheart, Ardyn, and Loki made their way into the room to witness the conflict at hand.

"T'is just as I feared," Skurge said. "All out war is going to break out!"

"Ugh, wonderful," Cruella said with a roll of her eyes. "Can't those other two fools see that Grimmie is the undisputed Fairest One of All?"

"You jest, Cruella!" Skurge objected. "Amora's radiant beauty outshines them all!"

"Well I say Sarah's the fairest," Blackheart said. "She's got the best tits."
"She does not!" Amora objected.

"I'm open to a counter-argument," Blackheart said with a shrug. "Here. Show me your tits."

"Pig," Amora and Grimhilde said together in unison.

"It doth appear that we art in need of an impartial judge," Sarah suggested. "Loki hast not engaged in fornication with any present. He shall judge fairly."

Amora and Grimhilde nodded in agreement.

Perfect. Loki mused to himself. Each believes herself to secretly have been my choice to receive the apple all along, and none suspect that Loki has played them all. Yet the game cannot be given away just yet....

"I must confess on my honor that I am not impartial," Loki said in response. "I told one of these maidens of the existence of the fruit. Though I will not say here for fear of furthering this conflict, my objectivity is skewed."

All three women scowled in anger at the vanishing of their perceived advantage. However, each one remained certain that she and she alone had been the one Loki told of the apple. None suspected his hand in the arrival of her two competitors.

"However!" Loki continued. "Allow me to suggest a contest to decide once and for all who truly deserves to call herself the Fairest One of All."

"Speak," Grimhilde commanded.

"All three of you appreciate that beauty is not merely aesthetic," Loki explained. "Beauty is power. Thus the Fairest must be the one who best understands how to lobby their beauty towards power. The contest I suggest is this: all three of you shall compete to seduce a powerful ruler and usurp a kingdom without sorcery or deception."

Grimhilde scoffed. "I have already completed that task with Snow White's father. I believe my status as the Fairest is proven."

"But thou didst not have to compete against two beautiful alternatives the first time," Sarah pointed out.

"I object as well," Amora chimed in. "Sarah will win the contest by your rules because she'll simply spread her legs for whatever king you choose and instantly gain his affection. Even kings are men."

Sarah huffed angrily at that accusation but did not deny it.

"I don't believe I said king, did I?" Loki asked. "On the contrary, the ruler I had in mind was Empress Celene of the Orlesian Empire. She's quite interested in taking lovers of the female persuasion, and she's quite available even now."

"Perhaps this will prove a worthy challenge after all," Amora said with a smirk.

"Some of us are currently spoken for," Grimhilde said with a glance cast towards Cruella. "The task is unbecoming."

"T'is cowardice, Grimhilde, not devotion that drives you," Sarah accused.

"Oh go for it, Grim," Cruella said. "I want to see these lesser beauties put in their place. Go get that
“Very well then,” Grimhilde said with a nod. "I consent to this contest."

Yes, they'll do the leg work for me. Loki thought to himself. But in the end, control of Orlais will belong to none but Loki!

Loki snapped his fingers and opened a portal to Chateau d'Onterre.

"Mine and Doom's estate lies within Orlais," Loki said. "I grant you all access to my library to prepare yourselves as you see fit. Leave your invitations into the Empress's palace to me."

The three women thanked Loki and proceeded through the portal. Cruella and Skurge followed soon after.

"So, uh, who was your actual pick for the fairest?" Blackheart asked once the others were out of earshot.

"Yes, do tell!" Ardyn chimed in. "But let's not play cheap and have you answer yourself or your paramour. Who, in Loki Laufeyson's eye, is the Fairest One of All?"

"Balder," Loki answered as he proceeded through the portal.

And for once, that wasn’t a lie.

Kieran's trial date was only a week out, not that he was really expecting it to matter. The chances of him being found not guilty were slim to none, and the public was already clamoring for his head on a silver platter. The everyday moral outrage of the boring masses mattered little. To them, Kieran Wilcox was just a sensationalist news story, a bogeyman they could lock away and feel safer about their meaningless lives. Not that it would actually save them.

No one knew about Kieran's recent phone call with the masked man. As far as they were concerned, he'd just received a call from his lawyer about the trial. They had no idea that the real event would come after. The man on the phone claimed to have been the original Lakewood Slasher, heckling Kieran for wearing his mask but also offering a chance for Kieran to escape and for the two of them to continue their killing spree together. Kieran had, of course, accepted, and already he was planning his bloody revenge against the town of Lakewood and especially the would-be "survivor girl" Emma Duvall.

"Your lawyer's here to see you," a prison guard said as he retrieved Kieran from his cell.

Kieran was puzzled by this. The man in the mask wasn't supposed to make his move until after the trial. Could this be his actual public defender checking in on him? Or was he finally getting the chance to meet the masked man face to face? The guard escorted him into the fluorescently lit room designation for visits. Waiting inside were two figures he'd never seen before: an African American woman who looked more like she was dressed to go clubbing than going to a prison and a nondescript bald white man whose most noteworthy feature was that his eyes lacked an iris.

"Kieran Wilcox," Fish Mooney said. "So nice to meet you in person."

Kieran said nothing and took a seat at the table.

"My name is Fish Mooney," she said as she sat across from him. "This is my associate Basil Karlo. Don't mind him. I'm the one you want to meet. I've taken... a special interest in your case."
Kieran waited until after the guards had left the room to speak. "You're not my lawyer. Are you a reporter or something?"

"No, nothing like that," Fish said. "I'm a very wealthy and powerful woman who quite enjoys helping the poor and unfortunate." She smirked to herself, musing that Ursula would appreciate that line. "Your over-worked public defender won't get you out of here, but I can."

Kieran eyed Fish suspiciously. "Why so interested in me?"

Fish pulled out a file and opened it, revealing case photos of the various murders of the Lakewood Slasher. "You and your accomplice, Piper, killed eight people together. And then you personally killed eight more all by yourself. That's a lot of bloodshed."

Kieran couldn't suppress a smirk as he looked over pictures of his handiwork. Fish flipped over to a photo of him in the black raincoat and the eerie and disfigured white Brandon James mask.

"And you took on quite a dramatic role while doing so," Fish added. "I admire that."

"Are you... him?" Kieran asked.

"The voice on the phone offering to break you out? No," Fish answered. "He's planning to kill you for taking his identity. I'm actually planning to help you."

"Then how did you-"

"Know about it?" Fish asked. "I know a lot of things, Kieran. For example, let me run some quotes by you. 'All it took was my dad dumping me in Atlanta so he could party on pain pills.'"

"Wait a minute, how could you have-"

"Or how about 'I was in the car the night my parents died. I caused the accident.'" Fish rolled off without waiting for Kieran to speak. "Then, of course, my personal favorite, 'Piper showed me that killing people is way more fun than therapy.'"

"Okay enough," Kieran said. "You've made your point that you're some kind of omniscient stalker. But you still haven't told me what you're doing here. And don't give me more of that bullshit about helping the poor."

Fish smiled, admiring the boy's gumption. "Let me ask you this first: what were you and Piper planning on doing once your killing spree had ended? Hmm? Just live a simple sickening ordinary life together?"

"We... we never really talked about what would happen after," Kieran admitted. "Our revenge was all that mattered."

"A friend of mine once said revenge may sate your being, but it's an end, not a beginning," Fish said. "This prison is an end. That masked man on the phone is an end. I'm here to offer you a new beginning."

"You some sort of church lady trying to appeal to my immortal soul?" Kieran asked. "Because if you are, I'll pass."

Fish shook her head. "No. Far from it. I don't want to redeem you or force you to become something you're not. I want to help you grow into a villain far greater than you could have ever dreamed of."
"Villain? Like some fairy tale?"

"I assure you, I'm quite serious. There are more things in this universe than you could ever imagine. Here. Basil, show him what you can do!"

Right before Kieran's eyes, Basil Karlo's face morphed and shifted like moldable clay until his face was identical to Kieran's. Kieran gasped in shock and disgust.

"What the fuck?" he said.

"Basil here has the power to take any shape he wants," Fish explained. "I have the power to control minds with a single touch, though I won't use it on you. And I have friends with other frightening and unique powers set towards a goal of conquest."

"This is fucking insane," Kieran said as he shook his head in disbelief.

"But quite real," Fish said. "You're a part of something much bigger, and you have the opportunity to grow into a man who can change the fate of entire worlds. Whereas before you were killing for revenge, now you can kill for a cause."

"Your cause?" Kieran asked.

"Mine and several others, yes," Fish answered. "But also your own. Like I said, I admire the work that you've done. You've impressed a powerful person, and I want to take your darkness to the next level. I can make you every inch a king. Or you can stay here and rot in prison... that is if the masked man doesn't kill you first. What do you say?"

"You want a weapon," Kieran said.

"No, I want you," Fish replied.

"Well you have to be getting something out of it," Kieran said. "I know if a deal sounds too good to be true that it probably is. Why do you want me?"

Fish sighed. Back in Gotham, any crook worth his salt would have jumped at the opportunities Fish was offering. Yet Kieran remained suspicious. For a moment Fish considered telling Kieran to forget it and go ask the mirror to locate another potential young villain. But then she reconsidered. Kieran was once bitten, twice shy with authority figures. If Kieran was to be her new "son," she'd have to make the first move.

"Back in my home city, I was a prominent crime boss," Fish said. "And I had this boy who held my umbrella and thought it an honor. I treated him like a son and made him everything that he was. But he betrayed me and cost me dearly. He then went on to become the head crime boss of our entire city and built an empire for himself."

"You must've been crazy with revenge," Kieran said.

"Actually no," Fish said. "I was full of pride. You see, something became clear to me: I had created this powerful man who dominated an empire. For all my schemes and all that I worked towards, my legacy was turning Oswald Cobblepot into the Penguin. But I was too blind to see it when he was under my wing, so I tried again with another boy. He, however, was never truly mine and died before I could mentor him."

"And so you want me to fill the hole those two left behind," Kieran said, finishing her thought.
"Your parents mistreated you and didn't understand you," Fish said. "And Piper, God rest her soul, offered you what support she could as a fellow lost child. Don't you see? I need a son, and you need a mother. Let me be that to you."

Part of Kieran pushed back on the notion of ever subjecting himself to the disappointment of a parent again. Fish's story seemed crazy and unstable, yet it was that same craziness that drew him in. It was the same breed of crazy that first drew Kieran to Piper. And what other alternatives did he really have? Prison or death. There was no choice here at all.

"Okay, I'm willing to give it a try," Kieran said. "That's all I can promise."

"All I ask," Fish said with a grin.

Fish snapped her fingers and a Corridor of Darkness opened.

"Swap clothes with Basil," Fish instructed. "He'll take your place here. Once you've changed, proceed through the dark portal then stay where you are until I come for you. Understood?"

Kieran nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Everything about this seemed like one of those bad video games that Noah used to never shut up about. Yet Kieran and Piper had basically turned Lakewood into a real-life horror movie, so maybe this wasn't all that different. Fish seemed to have a lot to teach him, and Kieran had to admit that he was interested in seeing where this went.

If nothing else, it would never be boring.

Steve and Daken found themselves in a desert world of sand and dead plants. The rocky ground appeared almost black, and an eerie fog rolled over the hills. Steve had been to the Underworld before, yet the Shadow World seemed almost creepier to him. After all, the Underworld was guided by the strong authority of Hades, whilst this world seemed to be a wild frontier of lawless anarchy.

"Cheery place," Daken remarked. "How do we even begin combing this place for a tiger? Did Imperious just expect us to wing it?"

"I have no idea," Steve said. "But we've got twenty-four hours before we have to get back to this exact spot. I'll set my phone alarm to go off every hour on the hour so we can keep track of the passing of time."

"Good call," Daken said. "We should probably make sure we can find our way back here. Your vampiric sense of smell still working?"

"Yeah, why?" Steve asked. "Please tell me you're not gonna pee on this spot."

"Similar concept but no," Daken said.

Daken extended one of his claws and slit his wrist, causing a stream of blood to trickle out of his arm onto the ground. Steve squirmed a bit and couldn't help but pop his fangs as his body ached with desire for the blood. Daken noticed this and gave his companion a little wink. Daken put pressure on his arm and his healing factor took care of the rest.

"Now we can find our way back here," Daken said.

Steve willed his fangs to retract and nodded in satisfaction. "That'll do."
"We should probably get going," Daken said. "Lots of ground to cover."

"Yeah, of course," Steve said. He paused and bit his lip, unsure if he should say what he was thinking. "Hey Daken-"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks," Steve said, feeling a bit awkward, "for coming along and all. I appreciate it."

"Hmph, well, don't go all sentimental on me," Daken said. "Figured I didn't have anything else more important to do. This is really just an excuse not to have to hang around Villain's Vale with Kingpin and Smythe."

"Sure it is," Steve said with a knowing smile.

"The voices sound like they're coming from over here!" a gruff voice called out.

"We've got company. Let's get gone!" Daken said as he grabbed Steve's hand and pulled his ally off in the opposite direction of the voices.

"But how? I didn't hear or smell them approach!" Steve said as he kept pace with Daken. "My vampire powers aren't that out of touch."

"I didn't hear or smell them either," Daken admitted without slowing his pace. "This is a land of the dead. They must be non-corporeal. That's going to make our lives extra difficult."

"Because this side quest wasn't aggravating enough already," Steve sighed. "Fuck Imperious."

"I tried," Daken replied with a wink. "Unwrapping all those bandages was too much of a hassle."

"You are so full of shit, Daken," Steve said with a laugh.

"It's a gift," he said.

The two stopped amidst a grove of dead trees to catch their breath and take stock of their surroundings.

"Did we lose them?" Steve asked.

"I think so," Daken said. " Doesn't mean we're home free yet."

"Well, well, what have we here?" a woman asked as she emerged from the brush.

Daken extended his claws, and Steve bared his fangs. The woman merely laughed. She appeared to be mostly human and wore black and blue body armor that accentuated her figure. Her most unusual attribute, however, was her helmet which resembled a large fly perching on top of her head.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Daken asked.

"Such hostility," she answered. "I'm Trakeena, Queen of the Scorpion Stinger... And I know you two are from the land of the living, which makes things very interesting."

Villain's Vale was like something out of a fantasy novel to Kieran, yet he didn't really have the chance to admire the scenery. He'd been thrust into this strange world rather suddenly, and Fish wasn't exactly giving him a lot of time to acclimate to his new surroundings. Fish escorted him down
a corridor to meet with an associate of hers. Her brisk walking pace seemed antithetical to her choice in footwear.

"So let me get this straight," Kieran said as he struggled to keep up. "Every fairytale and legend is-"

"Quite real," Fish answered. "Yes, I know it seems absolutely ridiculous, but our allies include the Evil Queen and the Norse God of Mischief. You get used to the insanity after a while."

"And there's a war going on," Kieran said. "Between the forces of light and darkness. And we're the darkness?"

"We're not fanatics or dedicated to darkness in some abstract sense," Fish clarified. "We're simply a group of like-minded individuals who refuse to be constrained by traditional morality. We're in it for power, control, and self-interest. The darkness is simply the method we're using to get there."

"Darkness, right," Kieran said. "It's a real literal thing that exists inside all of us? Not just a metaphor? Is it just any time you do something evil?"

"I can't claim to be an expert," Fish admitted. "But, yes, it's quite real. It's a universal force attracted to anger, hatred, selfishness, and power. Maleficent describes the darkness as an ocean where you have to be careful not to be dragged under the waves. I'll teach you how to tap into later. Given your sins, I'm sure you'll have quite the aptitude for it."

"And you came back from the dead?" Kieran asked.

"Twice," Fish answered.

"So... could... you know, the people I killed or... Piper...," Kieran said as he trailed off.

"No," Fish said. "The only way to come back on your own steam in by mastering the powers of darkness. Even I'm not that powerful. The rest of us have to rely on the whim of gods to get resurrected. Piece of advice: don't get killed."

"Don't plan on it," Kieran answered.

Fish led Kieran into the sterile laboratory of Alistair Smythe. Unlike Doom's lab, Smythe's appeared relatively modern and sleek in aesthetic rather than looking like something out of Frankenstein. Smythe himself, on the other hand, made Kieran gasp in disbelief when he first laid eyes upon him. From the lab, Kieran was expecting a boring looking man in a white lab coat, not a shirtless muscular cyborg with mutations growing out of his shoulders.

"Hello Alistair, how are you doing today?" Fish asked.

"Quite well, thank you," Smythe answered as he looked up from his workbench. "I've just been putting the finishing touches on the Wilcox suit."

"Perfect timing," she replied. "Because here is Kieran Wilcox himself."

"Uh, hi," Kieran said with a wave.

"Pleasure to meet you," Smythe said as he punched a button on his control panel. "Allow me to show you what I've been working on."

A mannequin emerged from a small elevator hidden beneath the floor. The mannequin was dressed in a form-hugging black hooded trench coat that was tied together with a black belt. Black combat
boots, pants, and gloves ensured that no skin was exposed. However, most prominently, the mannequin wore a white ghostly mask that looked as if it were frozen mid-scream.

"I based the aesthetic on photos of Mr. Wilcox's Lakewood Slasher ensemble," Smythe explained. "However, I modified the outfit to allow for armor and easier mobility."

"You changed the mask," Kieran noted as he walked up to get a closer look.

"Your old mask was based on Brandon James," Fish said. "It belonged to the original masked man who was planning to kill you for using his image, and it was chosen by Piper to be the instrument of her vengeance in the first place. Better to start over with a fresh mask so that you can be Kieran under your own banner."

"I found myself inspired by Edvard Munch's *The Scream,*" Smythe added. "It seemed an appropriate means to tweak the image of the mask whilst maintaining the same general appearance. But the mask is not merely aesthetic. It's bulletproof, has an advanced movement scanner to alert you where others may be hidden nearby, and it has built-in vocal modification and a communication device."

Kieran ran his fingers over the sleeve of the coat. "Sturdy leather?"

"Yes," Smythe nodded. "It's made of the same material Organization XIII made their cloaks out of."

"Who are they?" Kieran asked.

"Powerful enemies who we wiped out," Fish answered.

"The cloaks shielded their wearers from the adverse effects of darkness and dark travel," Smythe explained. "Now that ability will belong to you. In addition, tubing in the seams allows you to emit a localized fog and smoke screen. The lining is also bulletproof to protect the wearer from injury."

"What about the weapons?" Fish asked.

"There's an arm-mounted switchblade built into the suit," Smythe explained. "I also had an adamantium hunting knife forged. It'll be sturdier and cut deeper than your old one. I threw in a few toys based on the Green Goblin's weaponry including electrical discharge through the gloves, small localized grenades, and razor bats."

"Sounds like this could make me a killing machine," Kieran said in awe as he admired his suit.

"Exactly the point," Fish said, beaming with pride. "Care to take it for a test drive, baby?"

Kieran grinned at that. "Yes, mama, I'd like that very much."

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Being trapped on a ship for hours on end with Hades, Winnie, and Pete was excruciating. With their self-imposed moratorium on talking to each other lifted, Pete and Winnie were constantly bickering with one another over what was best for Mary. Hades, on the other hand, was far too antsy for his own good and had taken to setting things on fire for momentary entertainment, something that had quickly incited Hook's rage when he saw parts of his beloved ship being used as firewood. That was why everyone gave a collective sigh of relief when Maleficent set up a return point spell on the ship's deck to allow anyone to warp away from the ship for a time and still be able to return even though the Jolly Roger had moved locations.

Loathed though he was to leave the Jolly Roger unattended, Hook needed a break from the others, and when Jafar offered to go on a supply run to a local port town known as Tortuga, Hook jumped
at the opportunity to go with him. In all fairness, it probably was for the best that Hook accompanied Jafar. Hook spent much of his time back in the Enchanted Forest hopping from port to port, dealing with the disreputable characters that dwelled there. With its rowdy atmosphere and perpetual drunken stupor, Tortuga practically felt like home for Hook.

"Is it some sort of holiday going on?" Jafar asked with a sneer as he noticed the constant drinking.

"Aye," Hook nodded. "It's a Wednesday, one of the seven weekly holiday drinking occasions."

"Amusing," Jafar sneered, sounding quite the opposite of amused. Jafar's head instantly whipped to face one direction when something caught his eyes. Hook looked around and tried to follow Jafar's gaze, but he saw nothing.

"What? What is it?" Hook asked.

"The boy," Jafar answered as he gestured to where he was looking.

At first, Hook expected to see Sora or someone else recognizable, but once Hook figured out who Jafar was watching, he understood. A teenage boy with handsome features was pickpocketing several of the pirates who were too drunk to notice him. Though it wasn't truly Aladdin, the boy might as well have been a mirror reflection of Jafar's hated rival.

"Filthy street rat," Jafar hissed.

"You know, if we were any sort of upstanding gentleman, we'd do our civic duty to ensure that the boy would never pick another pocket," Hook said coyly. "One less potentially plucky hero in the making."

Jafar laughed sinisterly at the notion. "Why, my dear, I think you're quite right. And I have a plan already in mind. Follow my lead."

The street rat made his way down the road, away from the hustle and bustle of the tavern. He counted up his nightly haul and did the math in his head. He figured he should be able to buy enough food for a week off of what he'd taken. He might've felt bad for stealing the doubloons except for the fact that most of them had been stolen by pirates in the first place. So, as far as the street rat was concerned, he was an agent of karma.

"Excuse me, young man," a withered old voice called out.

The street rat turned to face a hunchbacked old man with a cane, tattered clothes, and a long and unruly white beard. The old man had a mad look in his eyes.

"I couldn't help but notice that you have a certain talent for stealing," the old man said.

"I do what I have to to get by," the street rat answered.

"A useful talent to have," the old man said. "In my youth, I was just like you, boy. Unfortunately, the vagaries of time have not been kind to these old bones. Yet perhaps together, you and I could be more than what we are."

"I'm listening," the street rat replied.

"The fabled Aztec treasure seized by Cortez himself is real, boy," the old man said. "I've seen it with my own eyes on the infamous Isle de Muerte. All that treasure is but a boat ride away for us!"
"Yeah right," the street rat scoffed. "And why would you share all that treasure with me?"

"I need a young pair of legs and a strong back to go in after it," the old man answered. "And, besides, we'd need a ship and crew to get us there."

"Then it's just a dream," the street rat said. "Because I don't have either of those things."

"You've heard of the golden rule haven't you?" the old man asked. "Whoever has the gold makes the rules! If you can steal us enough gold, we can have a fine crew at our disposal within a day's time. And I know exactly where to get what we need."

The old man escorted the street rat back towards the tavern and gestured towards a large burly pirate with a fat purse hanging at his waist.

"That man's wallet should be sufficient," the old man said.

The street rat at first appeared unsure of himself, but, eventually, greed got the better of him, as Jafar knew it would. The street rat proceeded over towards the burly pirate. Hook was sitting two tables over, enjoying a drink and pretending to mind his own business. The tavern wenches attempted to sway him towards pursuing carnal distractions, but he waved them off. The plan was unfolding. Just as Jafar promised, the street rat snuck back into the tavern. Hook kept his eyes on the boy without making it obvious that he was watching. Once the street rat had his hand reaching out for the pirate's purse string, Hook made his move.

"OI! THIEF! STOP!" Hook shouted, drawing the attention of all within the tavern.

The burly pirate whirled around to see the street rat wrapping his hands around the purse. The pirate swung out towards the boy, but he dodged the swing nimbly and began to scurry off. The street rat would have escaped too if it weren't for a flash of red magic causing him to trip on his way out. The momentary setback was all the other pirates needed to grab him up. They swarmed over him like vultures on a carcass. Hook strolled out of the tavern casually, using his hook to snatch the burly pirate's purse on the way out. No one noticed his smooth theft.

Hook ducked down into a nearby alleyway where the old man was waiting. Jafar's talent for disguises was impressive, but Hook could still clearly see his boyfriend behind the fake beard and makeup. Hook held up the fat purse of gold triumphantly.

"That wasn't a part of the plan," Jafar hissed.

"I improvised," Hook said with a shrug. "And now we've some pocket change."

In a flash of red magic, Jafar discarded his disguise and resumed his usual appearance.

"Not that the old man look wasn't flattering, but I far prefer you this way," Hook said with a wink.

Jafar cracked his back and laughed at the completion of their scheme. "I must admit, that was invigorating. I doubt that little rat will be stealing ever again."

"If he lives," Hook added with a devilish smirk. "Pirates aren't exactly known for being a merciful lot."

"I suppose now we should purchase the supplies and head back to the ship," Jafar said.

"Why hurry back?" Hook asked. "We've plenty of time left before the Jolly Roger makes it to Isle de Muerte, and I'm in no hurry to deal with annoyances aboard my ship at the moment. Let's stay and
cause a bit more mischief."

Jafar smirked at that notion. "Your wish is my command."

Chapter End Notes

Kieran Wilcox is from the MTV Scream series. I've intercepted him before his untimely death in the season two finale.

Basil Karlo is from Gotham.

Trakeena is from Power Rangers: Lost Galaxy.

The costume that Smythe gives Kieran is supposed to more or less be the one worn by Ghostface in Dead By Daylight.

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