**Golden Cuffs**

by Kelyon

Summary

To save her people, Belle sells her body to the Dark One, giving herself up to his monstrous desires. Over time, she comes to enjoy the pleasures and pains Rumpelstiltskin gives her body. But would he take her heart, if she was brave enough to offer it to him?

***As of 6-21-19 this fic updates biweekly! Every OTHER Friday in the evenings EST! My inbox is always open, questions answered every TMI Tuesday!***
The Ogres

Belle never thought of the ogre attacks as a war.

Wars were fought with soldiers and generals. Wars had battlegrounds and civilians were supposed to be safe. Wars had rules and leaders, wars were fought for reasons. Wars could be won--and even if not won, wars could be survived.

But no one survived ogres.

Belle first heard of the attacks on her people from her cousin Andre. He told her on a fine, late winter day, when the sun was bright on the snow and the sky was blue and cloudless. Andre insisted on taking his sisters Jeanne and Little Claude out to play in the snow and they invited Belle and her friend Mathilde to come along. Though her cousin laughed and played with his sisters, Belle could see a worry in his bright blue eyes. She found a moment when they could be alone--they were fighting against the other three in a snow battle and were stockpiling snowballs in preparation for an ambush--and spoke to him.

“Except for Little Claude, aren’t we all too old to be playing in the snow?”

Andre brushed back a lock of his blond hair and went back to making snowballs. “We’re young enough, I think. Young enough to play for as long as we can.”

Belle put a mittened hand on his shoulder as he bent over the snow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Andre straightened up. “I didn’t want to tell the other girls. I don’t want to scare them. But you should know, Belle.” He looked around, scanning the snowy field for eavesdroppers. “There was a fire, at a farmhouse in the western plains. Killed the whole family.”

“Well that’s very sad, but why would it frighten us?”

Andre licked his lips, his breath showing in the cold air. “The whole building burnt down, except for one wall.”

“And?”

“That wall didn’t burn because it was a hundred feet away from the rest of house.”

Belle blinked. The air froze in her chest. “What?”

“What could do that to a house, Belle?”

She gaped before answering, “Lots of things! Even if it wasn’t a regular fire, then it must have been a dragon.”

“A dragon wouldn’t let a wall go unburnt. And it couldn’t throw a wall! That’s what I’m saying. Part of a house was picked up and thrown.”

“It could have been a giant.” Belle’s voice was brittle. Even she didn’t believe that.

“There haven’t been giants in this realm for hundreds of years. They keep to their kingdom in the sky. You know that, you read that to me from a book when we were children. You know what it is Belle, what it has to be.” He rubbed his arms over his chest, as though feeling the cold for the first
“Is that what you really think?” Belle whispered. “Ogres?”

Andre looked at her nodded. “Now do you understand why I didn’t want to tell the other girls?”

Neither of them said a word to the others, but the whole land knew in the next few weeks. After two more attacks on isolated farms, Belle’s father sent out seven of his guards to the western farmlands. They were good knights, and Sir Maurice told them how confident he was that they would be able to drive the monsters back and be home before spring.

Only one man returned to the castle, half-mad and already dying.

Everything changed after that. Belle’s castle became a fortress, a military command center. Andre was made a captain in a makeshift army. Belle’s uncles were generals now, and her father the commander of a war that had no rules. Farm by farm, the ogres attacked, destroying homes and trampling fields, spreading fires and killing everything that moved. They did not negotiate or accept surrender or take prisoners. And they came closer to the castle every day.

Belle’s mother, Lady Collette, gathered the women of the castle and the surrounding town to aid the war effort. She encouraged everyone to do their duty, work hard, remain vigilant, and endlessly pray for the gods to end the violence. Belle trailed behind her mother, watching her and learning from her example. The people looked up to her, both as a figurehead and as a concrete benefactress. While Sir Maurice protected his territory, Lady Collette provided for their people.

Belle did what she could with her limited power. Her small library had only one book covering the subject of ogres—and that was only a single entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Magickal Creatures*—but she read that text so often that the words were imprinted on her heart. The hours that she and her ladies used to spend embroidering silk for her wedding trousseau were now devoted to tearing strips of linen and rolling them up into bandages. They tried to keep calm and continue their tasks, but conversation often turned grim.

“Belle, didn’t the book say that ogres are blind?” Jeanne asked one afternoon. Her fingers twisted around the strip of cloth in her hand.

“If they were blind they wouldn’t attack at night,” Mathilde pointed out. She took Jeanne’s bandage and rolled it up quickly, dropping the roll into a basket on the floor and reaching for another strip so that she might begin the process anew. Belle admired her friend’s industry, that she could ease her worry with work instead of just worrying uselessly, the way Belle herself was prone to.

“But perhaps they’re blind the way bats are.” Jeanne looked at Belle with bright blue eyes. The two of them had the same eyes, her mother always noted, a family trait. “Are they?”

Belle blinked, became aware of herself sitting in front of the fire in her bedchamber, holding a swath of linen in her hands, listening to her friends talking about ogres yet again. She blinked again and shook her head slightly to clear it. “No, no ogres aren’t blind. They’re actually quite sensitive to sunlight, which is why they attack at night. But they are also drawn to fire… and they like to make it bigger.”

As the ogres moved from farms and into more populated areas, the threat of fire had become as much a danger as the monsters themselves. Belle often wondered if the ogres knew this, if they spread fires intentionally—or if they were just mindless brutes, knowing nothing more than that the flames made it easier to see. Either way, the blazes spread and at night the western sky was red as blood.
Little Claude sat on the floor next to the basket, flattening down the piles of bandages with her chubby hands. “Is it true ogres like to eat children best?”

“No,” Belle lied without a moment’s pause. “We don’t actually know that they eat people at all. But they do make a terrible mess.”

“They stomp on houses,” Little Claude said with certainty.

Mathilde and Jeanne shared a look with Belle over the little girl’s head. All of them had conspired to protect Little Claude from the worst news of the battlefield. But no one could stop a child from knowing about monsters.

“They do,” Belle answered, trying to keep her voice cheerful. “But the people who live in the houses can run away and find a safe place, a house that’s too big to stomp.”

Again, Belle had the sensation of looking into her own eyes as Little Claude looked at her with a dawning realization. “That’s all those new people! That’s where they come from!”

“Very smart!” Mathilde took a turn in humoring the little girl. “Those people are refugees. They don’t have homes, so they came here for help.”

“Because we’re safe here,” Jeanne picked up her sister into a hug. “Nothing bad is going to happen to us.”

Belle looked down again at the bandage in her hands and offered up a prayer to anyone listening that her cousin’s words would be the truth.

A little later, Mathilde’s mother Ermentrude came to the door. “Lady Belle? My lady wishes to speak with you in her solar.”

Belle stood up and set the unrolled linen back in the basket. Even though Ermentrude was practically her third parent, the older woman was always deferential, the enforcer of etiquette and manners in all the young people of the castle. When Ermentrude said “my lady” she meant Lady Collette, a woman she had been friends with for over twenty years, but who nevertheless outranked her because she was The Lady of the castle.

As Ermentrude lead her to the room where she had spent most of her childhood, Belle saw with new eyes just how crowded the castle had become. All the able-bodied men had been called up to train as soldiers and guards, and many of them had brought their families with them. There were refugees as well, women and children and old people congregated in the great hall. How many more people were there in the town surrounding the castle? Had everyone come here for safety?

Lady Collette stood up from her ledger book to greet Belle when she arrived. “Darling!” she embraced Belle. “How are you? I’m so sorry, I haven’t seen you all day.”

“It’s alright, Mama, I’m quite well. What’s going on? Is there news?”

“There is news, sweetheart. And not news I’m glad to hear.” Her mother sighed and touched Belle’s cheek. Her eyes washed over Belle, covering her face, drinking her in. Eyes that were the same color as her own, but so much older and sadder. “When we were at peace, I tried to get your father to think of a peaceful future, of prosperity and leisure. I wanted him to find you a good man, a gentle man, who you might grow to love.”

“Mama?” This was not the sort of news Belle had been expecting.
“At my most ambitious, I knew of several widowers who had property on the river, controlling ports of entry. I thought that would be good for us, to be able to ship in and ship out more goods. And life in city would have been exciting for you, wouldn’t it? Always something new to see, people to talk to. It would have been good for you.” Lady Collette swallowed. “But we can’t only think of what is good for ourselves, Belle. I cannot give you the future I wanted for you, but it is better than having no future at all.”

Belle felt her brow furrowing as she pieced together everything her mother had just said. “So, did Papa pick out someone for me to marry?”

Her mother nodded, her hand on her throat. Her fingers played with the golden chain of her necklace. “Yes, your father chose someone who is… good for us, and terrible for you.”

“It’s Sir Gaston, isn’t it? The Duke’s son?”

Lady Collette chuckled and gave Belle a soft smile. “How did you know?”

“Gaston was the only one of my suitors who you hated.”

That earned Belle a full laugh and another embrace. When they broke apart, Lady Collette reminded Belle that Gaston was the only suitor who came with a bride price of a thousand men-at-arms. It had been a deal Sir Maurice had been unable to resist.

“As long as it helps,” Belle said. “If Gaston can save us from the ogres, I’ll marry him tonight.”

“Well, you won’t have to act so quickly as all that, darling. I think next summer will be a fine time to have a wedding. When the roses bloom. That was when I married your father.”

Belle nodded. “Perhaps that will bring me luck, the same happiness and love you have.”

“Oh happiness is all about luck, my dear. But love is about work, and never giving up. Some men are easy to love, and some are difficult.”

“I have heard that Gaston is well-loved in his court.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that too,” Lady Collette cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. “But even men who are loved by many are not always loved by their wives.”

Belle put her hand on her mother’s back, on the stiff boning of her corset. “Even if I cannot love Gaston, I will do my duty by him.”

Mother wrapped her arm around daughter. “Of course you will,” she said with a kiss to her head. “You are an dutiful girl, my Belle. Obedient and loving. I just wish you had someone worthy of you to love and obey.”

Lady Collette seemed much more upset about Belle’s engagement than Belle herself felt. Her mother looked thin and drawn. Wasn’t she eating? She told everyone else to eat and keep their spirits up, to let no food go to waste. But she looked so tired now, so hopeless.

“Mama?” Belle softly broke their embrace.

“Yes, darling?”

“Do you know if there have been any attacks near the lodge?”

Belle’s mother cocked her head to the side. “The lodge in the Eastern Forest? No, I don’t think I’ve
heard of any attacks there. Why, dear? Why do you ask?"

“I thought, perhaps, before I marry… we might take a trip there.”

“A trip?” Lady Collette repeated. “You mean a holiday?”

Belle nodded. “Just for a week or so? If it’s safe, of course, and if we can be spared from the castle.”

“Your father couldn’t be spared.”

“Of course not, but he doesn’t need to come anyway. We should have a trip with a few men as possible. Just guards and stableboys. It could be just the ladies. We could relax and forget about the war for a while, forget about everything.”

“Forget about your wedding?” Lady Collette gave her daughter a sly smile. She thought for a moment, pacing and running the pendant of her necklace through its chain. Belle loved that necklace, the chip of unicorn horn on a chain so fine it might as well be thread. It had belonged to her grandmother, and years from now it would be Belle’s, and years after that it would go to her daughter as well. Her mother’s necklace was the past and the future all at once.

Lady Collette came to a decision. “I will, of course, have to consult with your father. But I think we might be able to sneak away for a week. It would be wonderful to have some time where it’s just us--just you and me and Ermie and Mathilde.”

“And Jeanne and Little Claude. We can’t go anywhere without them.”

“I would never forget my favorite nieces! Yes, just the six of us, and the servants.” She paced as she thought out loud. “This is exactly what we need right now. Some time to be with my daughter as she prepares to become a woman. Some time to rest in a place far from this war. I’ll discuss it with your father and we can leave by tomorrow morning!”

Even before the attacks, the lodge had been a haven for Belle. Smaller than the castle, the lodge itself was rougher and simpler--and so was the life they led there. When she was a girl, she had run around barefoot and swum in the river, climbed trees and read books in the branches. In the fall her father hunted in the forests, but in the spring and summertime, Belle made those woods her second home. Even now that she was a lady, the routine there was looser and she felt freer. The lodge was a place for bonfires and eating with your hands and staying up late telling secrets and making dares. There was no place she felt more safe.

It was only their second night there when Belle woke up to her mother shaking her. The bed here was big enough that her cousins and her friend could all sleep with her. But only Little Claude remained asleep when the lantern light revealed the terror on Lady Collette’s face.

“You have to get up, all of you. Get up, get dressed, get outside!”

“Mama, what’s happening?”

“They’re here,” Lady Collette said with grim certainty. “Ogres are attacking the village down the hill. They’ll be here soon as well.”

“Oh gods!” Mathilde’s loose dark hair covered her face as she cried. “We’re going to die!”

“No,” Belle promised. “No we’re not. Mama, what is your plan?”
“We have to run. All of us. Jeanne, can you carry your sister?”

“For miles.” Jeanne was already hoisting Little Claude over her shoulder like a flour sack. The little girl remained asleep.

“Good. Mathilde, you’ll need to hold on to Claude’s foot while we run, and hold on to Belle’s hand with your other hand. That’s how we’re going to do this. We’re going to hold hands, hold on to each other and make sure no one gets lost. Ermintrude is explaining this to the servants now. The guards we brought with us—” Lady Collette’s voice cracked as she fought against a cry. “—they will hold the monsters off as long as they can.”

“Where are we going, Mama? Where will you lead us?”

Belle could see her mother trying to put on a brave smile, but the tears were no match for it. “I don’t know these woods, Belle,” she said. “Not like you do, my brave girl, my explorer. You know the carriage house where we trade horses, just before we get here?”

“Of course.” It marked the last leg of their journey, the most excruciatingly boring hours of the carriage ride to get to the lodge.

“Can you walk there through the woods? Have you ever gone there on your rambles?”

“Yes, I can make it there in about an hour.” It was faster through the forest than on the carriage road.

“Can you lead us there, brave girl?”

“Yes, Mama.” In the dark it would be difficult, but she had to try.

“Good girl!” Her mother squeezed her. “And once we get to the carriage house, we’ll find a way to get back home.”

“Aunt Collette, what of our luggage? Our clothes?”

“They don’t matter, Jeanne.” Lady Collette was speaking to all of them now, even to Ermentrude and the servants who had gathered in the doorway. “Nothing matters but that we live through this night and get back to the safety of the castle. Everyone hold hands, and Belle will lead us.”

Fear filled Belle’s stomach like a thousand wriggling worms, but she forced herself to be brave. “Yes, Mama.”

They crept through the lodge in darkness, holding hands like a group of children. Lady Collette brought up the rear, one hand free, the other gripping tightly to Ermentrude. Her mother was safe with Ermentrude holding on to her. They had been friends for longer than Belle had been alive. They would not let each other go.

In darkness, in silence, they made their way to the kitchens. The root cellar had a door that opened from the inside and led out to the orchards. From there they could get to the forest. When Belle used her free hand to push open the door she expected to be greeted by the smell of pear blossoms.

Instead she smelled fire.

The sky was red and gray and black—fire and smoke and darkness all around her. She heard the high-pitched shrieks of the horses in the burning stable and the shouted commands of the men who had been charged to keep them all safe. The fire roared but it was nothing compared to the triumphant, grunting howls of the ogres. Belle saw one. Silhouetted against the blazing fire—black against orange—the figure of an ogre
stretched out over the stable. It was shaped like a man but so much larger. In one hand it held the rear half of a horse.

Her breath escaped her. Belle froze in her tracks and gaped up at the monster. She couldn’t see its face, couldn’t see if it was looking at her or at the fire. What did it want? What would it do? Who would it kill next?

“Run, Belle!”

Her mother’s voice cut through the spell. She forced her gaze away and pulled Mathilde by the hand into the darkness.

Was there truly safety in the woods? Surely the ogres knew the forest better than Belle did. But if they wanted the fire and the horses and the men who had to stay behind, then perhaps they would ignore the line of women creeping slowly through the trees.

Who could say what the ogres wanted? Who could fathom how they worked or what could stop them? What could stop them? A creature larger than a house would have no fear of men. Even a knight on horseback would be little threat to these monsters. Certainly Belle and her companions could do nothing to resist such force.

All they could do was escape it, and even then only for a while. For surely the carriage house was no safe haven. That was valuable only as a place where carriages were, where they would rent horses that would take them home, to the castle with the thick stone walls where everyone came seeking safety. Home had to be safe. It had to be.

It took a long time to find the carriage house. Darkness kept even Belle on her toes in the forest. She couldn’t see the rocks and roots that were under her feet. She couldn’t navigate her usual trails. And holding on to Mathilde, having to pull the whole line of them along with her, made the journey even slower. Dawn was breaking when the women finally came upon the wooden building, early morning mist obscuring the edges of their vision.

“We’re here,” Belle panted, taking her first full breath since she had gone to bed last night. The carriage house still stood. The horses here were whole. They would go home soon!

Finally letting go of Mathilde, she looked around at her companions. The light was dim as she looked into the forest. She saw figures but couldn’t make out all the faces.

“We’re all here, aren’t we? Is everyone still holding someone’s hand? Jeanne, how is Little Claude?”

“Lucky brat slept the whole way.”

Belle laughed in relief, but her smile faded when she saw Ermentrude come out of the fog.

“My lady,” was all she said at first. But that couldn’t be right. Belle wasn’t “my lady,” not to Ermentrude. The only person she called that was…

Belle looked up at the older woman. One hand was still holding on to the littlest servant, the scullery maid. Her other hand was grasped into a tight fist.

“Ermentrude?” Belle whispered. It was a question she could not ask, but Ermentrude answered it anyway. She held out her fist to Belle and released her grasp to reveal Lady Collette’s necklace.

No. No, that couldn’t be true. Yes, perhaps Mama had lost her grip on Ermentrude but that didn’t mean the worst. That didn’t mean…
“I held on for as long as I could,” Ermentrude’s voice was stiff and shaky. “I held onto her hand, I grabbed on to her neck. I saw it, that thing…” she shook her head. “I didn’t let go, my lady. But then she was gone.”

Belle reached out and took her mother’s necklace from her mother’s oldest friend. The clasp was broken, it had been ripped from her throat. She could imagine Ermentrude losing her grip slowly, fighting til the end, grabbing finally at the one part of Lady Collette that the monsters couldn’t hurt.

“Mama,” Belle whispered. She was supposed to have this necklace someday but not yet, not now. It was unicorn horn, protection against poison.

But there was no protection against ogres.

It was as though she hadn’t realized anything before this moment. As though the ogres were an inconvenience, something that happened to other people. Not to her, not to them, not to Mama. Belle and her family couldn’t die, not really.

But they could. They had. She was gone.

Everything was gone.
Belle tried not to cry as Jeanne dragged a brush through her hair. Lady Colette had always said that Belle had her father’s hair--thick and curly and brown. If hair could have a personality, hers was definitely masculine. It was stubborn and unmanageable.

“This thing is going to break, Belle,” Jeanne grunted as she wrestled the wooden hairbrush out of the tangles. “Why haven’t you used that tonic we got at the market? It works wonders for Mathilde.”

“I have been using it!” Belle insisted hotly. “My hair is just incurable.” She threw her face into her hands and heaved her elbows on her dressing table. It was still so early and all she wanted was for this day to be over. “I’m hopeless.”

It was the afternoon before the feast celebrating her engagement to Sir Gaston. Her father had made the pronouncement in the town square that morning and all the people had cheered. Her aunts and uncles and cousins had been pouring in to the castle for days now--further displacing the villagers who had already been displaced by the ogres. Gaston and his soldiers and the Duke and his court had also descended, setting up tents and pavilions all around the castle. Sir Maurice was housing all of them--the gentry, their servants, and their animals. The cost of feeding everyone was an extravagance Belle had never seen before.

But it was a cost they had to bear. It was expected that the only daughter of a prosperous lord would be feted and doted on for her engagement, no matter who she was to wed. And Belle was marrying the son of a duke! A second son, to be sure, but the second son of the Duke of the Frontlands! Such an advantageous match had to be properly--and expensively--celebrated.

In addition to the age-old tradition of ludicrous hospitality, Belle knew that they had to prove their worth to the Duke and his son. In marrying Belle, Gaston was lowering himself socially. If she were not the heir to her father’s land--if Gaston could not call himself the lord of his own castle once Sir Maurice was gone--he wouldn’t have bothered to even court her, let alone offer to marry her and take up their war as his own.

They needed Gaston to win the war. They needed the men he brought with him, the experienced lieutenants, the hearty soldiers in their strong armor. Gaston had conquered his father’s enemies and now Belle’s people needed him to win against their enemy. She needed him to save them.

Gaston was their only hope, and she needed to make him happy. She had to be beautiful and pleasing, everything he wanted. She had to look resplendent. Nothing could be allowed to stop her, not even her hair.

Belle wiped her tears and sat up straight. “Try again, please, Jeanne.”

With grim determination, Jeanne picked up the brush.

Would this all be easier if her mother were here? Lady Collette had always told Belle what to do
when she was troubled, how to be brave in the face of fear. She had always comforted her.

If nothing else, Lady Collette’s presence would mean that Belle would have no reason to feel guilty about having a feast so soon after a funeral. Her mother hadn’t wanted her to marry Sir Gaston. Belle was betraying her by agreeing to marry him. Celebrating that betrayal only a month after her mother had died was the same as spitting on her very grave. But she would understand, wouldn’t she? The ogres weren’t stopping, they were still killing people and destroying homes. Lady Collette had to know how important it was to stop the attacks, to save everyone. Gaston would do that, but only if Belle married him.

“Well, I guess that’s a little better,” Jeanne sighed as she looked her over. The curls had loosened into waves soft enough to style. “Did you ever decide if you wanted it pinned up or hanging loose?”

“I should wear Gaston’s hair pin,” Belle said dully. “Bring out the armory.”

Jeanne snorted and opened up a large box of copper hair pins, the “armory” necessary to hold Belle’s hair up in a stylish coiffure. With admirable patience, Jeanne began to take up Belle’s tresses and pin them into place.

Belle made herself stay still. The pins were sharp and if she turned her head or even spoke, Jeanne might have a mishap that would end in blood. There was a strange comfort in this stillness, in being forced to sit in one place and not move, to have other people move around her and act their will upon her as though she were nothing. It was peaceful, to know that the only thing required of her at that moment was to sit on her stool in front of her vanity and try not to wince when Jeanne pulled her hair.

As part of his betrothal gift, Gaston had offered her an ornate hair pin. It was made of silver and had a large gem on the end—a poison-green peridot. The pin was heavy and old-fashioned, apparently an heirloom, but hopelessly ugly.

And worse, it was completely useless. Jeanne had left the hair on the back of Belle’s head loose so that the silver pin could be the focus. But the heavy thing wouldn’t work. It slipped through her hair and refused to hold anything up. In the end, Jeanne used the copper pins to to the heavy lifting and set Gaston’s pin at the very top of the mound of hair, a nonfunctional ornament.

Jeanne stepped back to examine her work. Belle sighed. “Are we done?”

“I am, but Mathilde still wants to do your cosmetics.”

Cosmetics. Of course. Fashionable women had to paint their faces with powder and rouge, and kohl around the eyes. Normally Belle didn’t have to worry about being fashionable, but this was a grand event. She was going to marry the son of a duke. She had to beautiful. Cosmetics were mandatory.

At least Mathilde knew how to apply them—which was more than Belle would ever be able to do. She was lucky she had her, lucky she didn’t have to do this herself, lucky she had another small stretch of time where she did have to do anything, but merely allow herself to be done to.

Mathilde held Belle’s face steady and looked into her eyes. It was such a stark intimacy, a closeness she rarely felt, even with the girl who shared her bed. Mathilde’s brown eyes looked into hers with intense focus. Belle felt the moisture of her friend’s breath, the heat of her skin as she leaned in close to make delicate marks on her eyes and cheeks and lips.

“Oh, Belle,” Mathilde whispered in that closeness. She spoke with an amazement that Belle had never heard from her normally sensible friend. “You’re so beautiful. The black around your eyes
makes the blue sparkle like diamonds!” Mathilde blinked suddenly and shivered as though she felt a
draft on this summer day. The girl straightened up and gave Belle a sheepish grin. “Gaston is lucky
to have such a lovely bride.”

Belle practiced a gracious and ladylike smile on Mathilde and Jeanne. “I wouldn’t be so lovely if I
didn’t have you two to help me.”

They helped her stand up of the stool and shook out a few wrinkles in her golden ball gown. The
dress had been a collective gift from her mother’s family: Jeanne’s mother, Aunt Therese, had
selected the pattern, Uncle Raoul, who had no children, had paid for the cloth-of-gold fabric, and her
grandfather had arranged with certain elves to have the whole thing sewn together in less than three
weeks. It was a mad extravagance, but it perfectly fit the life she would soon be leading as Gaston’s
wife.

“Is there anything else?” Belle asked the room full of attendants.

“Only this.” Ermentrude stepped forward and offered her a small wooden box. “I just got it back
from the jeweler’s today.”

Belle opened the box and saw her mother’s necklace lying on a strip of red velvet. The jeweler had
repaired the clasp and polished the gold and the chip of unicorn horn until the whole thing gleamed.
Belle bowed her head and took Ermentrude’s hand. “Thank you,” she whispered. It was all she
could say.

The older woman could say even less, but she squeezed Belle’s hand tightly and gave her a small,
proud smile. “Let me put it on you, my lady.”

Belle gave Ermentrude the box and turned around. She caught a glimpse of herself in the vanity
mirror—a woman, so unlike the girl she had been this past winter. So much had changed, both around
Belle and inside her.

“I wish Mama could see me wearing this.”

“She would be so proud of you.” Ermentrude put her hands on Belle’s bare shoulders as she fastened
the necklace around her throat. “Just as I am.”

Belle turned again and opened her mouth to speak, but Mathilde shouted, “Don’t cry, you’ll ruin the
cosmetics!” and the whole room chuckled.

Once they got to the great hall, everyone sat in different places. Jeanne stayed with Andre and their
parents at the family table. Ermentrude and Mathilde sat on benches with a few of Lady Collette’s
old friends at a lower table. Little Claude was too young to join in the feast and was probably already
asleep in the trundle bed in Belle’s room.

As one of the guests of honor, Belle sat at the high table next to Gaston. The two of them where the
focus of the room—given more honor than even Gaston’s father. The Duchess and Gaston’s sisters
were seated along his side at the high table. Belle’s father was the only person seated on Belle’s side.
They all looked down on the people sitting in front of them—though for Belle and Sir Maurice the act
of looking down was only literal. The Duke’s family looked down on people even when they stood
on the same floor.

Gaston looked down at her even when she stood over him. His expression didn’t change when he
saw her by his side. He remained disinterested and frankly bored. He was already seated, long limbs
spawling over his chair.
Belle waited for him to stand and pull out her chair so that she might join him. These chairs were solid oak, and heavy--and furthermore it was polite for gentlemen to stand when ladies approached them. But he didn’t get up. Belle stood at attention like a servant until her father finally noticed her and pulled the chair out of her way so that she might sit.

“Thank you, Papa,” she said brightly, more for Gaston’s benefit than her father’s. Ermentrude had always told her that the only answer to rudeness was courtesy.

Gaston glanced over at her briefly and then looked away again without speaking.

Through the first course, Belle watched the man she was going to marry. She had met him before and they had exchanged six entire words before their fathers had decided that they were to wed. He was certainly handsome--tall and muscular. She heard that he had trained at soldiering since he was a boy and was tireless on the practice field.

He had a strong jaw and a cleft in his chin. He was clean shaven but had coarse black hair on the backs of his hands and fingers. Belle could imagine how much hair he had on his arms and legs and chest. Unbidden, the thought came of this man naked in her bed, ordering her touch his hairy body. What would that feel like? Would his hair scratch her, like wool? Would it hurt? Would his muscles have any softness, any comfort to them at all?

Belle swallowed and tried to distract herself from her perverse thoughts. For the second time in her life, she spoke to her fiance. “There certainly are a lot of people here tonight.”

It took Gaston a moment to notice that she had spoken, then another moment to come up with an answer. “It just looks like a lot of people, because your hall is so small. Back home we could fit twice this many.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Belle said, not dishonestly. She’d rarely had an opportunity to visit the grand castles and palaces of nobility like the Duke. It would be an adventure to move to a new home and meet new people.

“But you have to wait,” Gaston spoke slowly, as though she needed an explanation, as though she didn’t understand. “We can’t get married until next summer.”

“Oh, I know,” Belle answered, a little embarrassed that she had seemed ignorant. “That was my mother’s idea. My parents married when the roses bloomed and she wanted us to--”

“Your mother’s dead, isn’t she?” Gaston interrupted her to grab a pastry from the server and shove it into his mouth. “Wasn’t that recent?”

“A month ago.” Speaking of it turned Belle’s stomach into stone and she waved away the servant with his tray.

Gaston took the opportunity to turn from her and Belle didn’t try to speak to him again until the eighth course.

“So what do you like to do?”

“Kill,” he said over a mouthful of wild boar. “If there isn’t a war going on, I’ll go out hunting.”

“Do you hawk as well? I’ve never had a falcon, but I’ve read so much about--”

“Hawking is for mannish widows,” Gaston threw a bone behind him on the floor. “Women should stay inside.”
Belle persisted. “I’ve heard that King Midas’ daughter, Princess Abigail, is a skilled falconer.”

Gaston snorted. “Like I said, mannish. A woman like Abigail doesn’t know her place.” He gave her a look over his wine goblet. “My wife needs to know where she belongs.”

She couldn’t stop herself. “I should belong at my husband’s side, shouldn’t I? Presenting a united front, doing things we both enjoy, being… companionable, together.”

“Is that what you think marriage is?” Gaston took a drink and muttered, “Stupid woman.”

“I’m not stupid,” Belle whispered, much too faint for him to hear. They ate the next several courses in silence.

By the end of the feast, after the servants had refilled their wine goblets many more times, Gaston had lost whatever composure he had started the meal with. He leaned back in his chair and lolléd his head over to look at Belle.

“How much longer is this going to go on?”

“Two more dishes. Happy occasions are celebrated with twenty-seven courses.”

“Twenty-seven?”

Belle nodded. “It’s a lucky number.”

“That’s stupid.” Gaston turned up his nose at the servant offering jam cakes and digestive tea.

“It’s tradition.”

“It’s a stupid tradition.”

Belle realized now that she’d had more productive and mutually fulfilling conversations with Little Claude. She realized that she had spent better evenings in the company of the cats in the barn. And she realized that for the next twenty years or more she would be obliged to speak to Gaston, to try to amuse him and understand him. It would be her duty as his wife, for as long as they lived.

She took a drink of wine.

After the final course of nutmeats, it was time for toasts. Then there would be dancing for as long as the musicians could stay awake. If Belle was lucky she would be in her bed by midnight.

As the host, Sir Maurice gave the first toast, much to Belle’s dismay. When he wasn’t reading from an official proclamation, her father was a terrible public speaker. He stumbled over words, repeated phrases, lost the thread of his own speech and often trailed off into silences that felt interminable for the audience. Lady Collette used to write his speeches down for him as he told her what he wanted to say. She had turned his half-formed thoughts and plans into a poetic oration that stirred the hearts and minds of every listener.

He was lost without her. Belle could see how old her father had become in the past few months since the war had started, since he had lost his wife. Not long ago, Sir Maurice had been a man of laughter and boundless energy. But now his laugh lines were wrinkles, and his steps were measured and grave. His hair used to be like Belle’s, but now under his cap his curls were thinning and gray. The more he spoke, the more his voice quavered.

“Belle,” he said to conclude, “I wish you and Sir Gaston every happiness. The times are troubled,
but we will get through them together. Even … even if we are not all together to see our happy endings. Gods bless you both.”

Below them, the assembled friends and family applauded and drank. Belle leaned over and whispered, “Thank you, Papa,” into his ear. Without her exactly meaning it to, her hand went up to her mother’s necklace. It comforted her to feel the gold chain beneath her fingers.

Then it was time for Gaston’s father to give a toast. The Duke was a tall man, like his son, but running to fat. He had a skilled tailor, however, and his clothes were expansive and expensive enough to turn his size into an asset. Thick robes and bejeweled doublets dyed in expensive blues and purples created the illusion of majesty and power. Looking at the Duke was like looking the very idea of Nobility in the face—and seeing it sneer at you.

Unlike Sir Maurice, the Duke’s hair and beard were still black, though his hairline had receded some, and his skin shone with sweat. He addressed the crowd with fluid ease and a clear voice. He was not afraid to make ribald jests that earned him hoots and laughter from his men. From what Belle could see, the Duke was the sort of man who enjoyed all that life had to offer—and often enjoyed it past the point of good sense.

“Is there anything more beautiful than a bride?” the Duke indicated Belle but addressed the whole crowd. “Any bride, of course, not just our sweet Lady Belle! Any girl who is on the cusp of womanhood, pure and clean as fallen snow, just waiting to be made a wife, waiting for a man to make her complete in a way she has never known before, never imagined.” Belle’s future father-in-law licked his lips as he looked at her and then shook his head. “I tell you, my friends, it is a shame—a damnable shame!—that the custom of a lord’s right has fallen out of favor!”

The Duke laughed and his men laughed and even the Duchess wore an unmoving smile. Gaston, to his credit, was stone faced. Under the table he twisted his fork in one hand, rubbing the silver back and forth with his thumb.

The Duke raised his glass. “A toast to my son! Boy, if you need help during the honeymoon, I am all too eager to lend a hand.”

Gaston grimaced at his father but made it look like a smile. Under the table, Belle could see him bend the fork backward over his hand.

Her Uncle Armand spoke after that, then one of Gaston’s people. Back and forth along the hall men stood and wished the couple well. Traditionally, toasts were to last until either everyone in the room had spoken or the kitchen ran out of wine.

Only one woman stood up to offer her blessings. Madame Nanette was a villager who was reverently known as a witch. She was certainly the most successful midwife within a hundred miles. She was eighty years old, had seen ten children grow to adulthood, and been present at every birth, wedding, and funeral that anyone among Belle’s people had ever heard of. If any woman had the right to speak in a public place, it was her.

“I’ll not take the lordships’ time,” Madame Nanette’s voice was high and clear. “Time is one thing I have little of. But I have much of wisdom. I have seen life and I have seen death. I have seen love and I have seen war. I have seen strength and I have seen weakness. Over and over I’ve seen it. And I see it now, Lady Belle. I see it in your life. I will not wish, for wishin’ is magic and magic has a cost I’ve no inclination to pay. But I will offer you hope, Lady Belle. Hope that your future lets you know what you want, and that you have the strength and wisdom to take it.”

With a simple nod, Madame Nanette raised her glass, drank, and sat down.
Though Belle didn’t entirely understand all that Madame Nanette had said, the words still pierced her heart. Perhaps it was because the old woman’s hope was an impossibility. The future didn’t care what Belle wanted. Even if she knew what her heart’s desire was, she would never have the chance to take it.

“Crazy old bat,” Gaston scoffed. “You people let just anyone talk, don’t you?”

Belle didn’t answer. Over the course of the evening she had learned there was no point.

The last speaker of the night was one of Gaston’s friends. He was a short man, and his round stomach strained the buttons on his lieutenant’s uniform. He swayied on his feet as he spoke, red-faced and with bright eyes.

“What can I say about Gaston?” the small man began his toast. “He’s the greatest hunter in the whole world! No ogre stands a chance against him--and neither do any of the ladies!” He threw his head back and laughed.

Beside her, Belle heard a sound she would have never imagined possible: Deep and booming laughter. It was Gaston. For the first time that evening, he was sitting up and paying attention to the speaker, looking down on the little man with sincere enjoyment.

“In the ranks,” the lieutenant gestured to the tables of soldiers, “we have a saying, a little joke. We say that no one can do things like Gaston. No one fights like Gaston, no one eats like Gaston, no one marches like Gaston--and it’s true! He’s the best!” The man turned his head to look at Belle. “So he deserves the best.”

Belle was not threatened by this drunkard, but her stomach did tremble at the thought of all it would mean to give Gaston what he thought he deserved.

“After all,” the little man was still talking, “we came all this way, to this poor, provincial town because that’s what Gaston told us to do. And because we’re the best, all us Frontlanders. Don’t forget, it was Frontland men who beat the ogres the last time they were a problem. We won that war, and we’ll win this one!”

“Hear, hear!” Gaston called out, clapping and stomping his feet with the rest of the men. And not just the Duke’s men, Belle noticed. Her own people were shouting their agreement, encouraging the bloodlust, getting swept away in a tide of confidence.

There had been another ogre war, hundreds of years ago in the Frontlands. But it had not been as easily won as the little man made it seem. She’d read that the war had dragged on for years, that a young man who joined the fight and lived to father a son would see the boy grow up and take his place in the ranks. No book mentioned how the war had ended, though, only that the victory had come quickly and suddenly--almost like magic.

When the little man finally sat down, Belle and Gaston lead the party in the first dance. It was a stately dance, slow and measured, and that gave Belle ample time to try to clear her head. She wasn’t used to drinking this much wine or eating as much as she had. She wasn’t used to wearing a gown with such heavy corseting, or having her hair pinned so tightly. She wasn’t used to feeling so exposed, to being looked at and talked about and required to smile so much when she had so little joy in her heart.

Belle went through the motions of the dance like a sleepwalker, curtsied politely to her fiancé, and left the great hall as soon as it was acceptable to do so.
She couldn’t bear it anymore. She couldn’t pretend to be polite and sweet and oh-so-radiantly-happy for another second. The pressure of maintaining this facade was enough to make her scream. Alone, Belle left the lights and noise of her own party and sought out the comforting darkness of her bedchamber.

But before she found it, she saw a tiny figure in a white nightgown, peering through the door to watch the celebrations.

“Claude?” Belle asked when she recognized the child. “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

The little girl looked away from her spying. “I was too excited and I couldn’t sleep. So they let me watch.”

“Do you like what you see?”

Little Claude nodded vigorously. “I’ll get married too, someday.”

Her heart cracked for her cousin, this little girl who had no idea what being married really meant. Had she ever been so innocent, so young? At that moment Belle was so weary she couldn’t remember ever being anything else.

Little Claude went back to her watching and Belle walked alone to her room. There was only one servant in her bedroom, but Belle only needed one person to help her out of her gown. She breathed deeply once she was freed from her corset and stays. Wearing only her shift, she felt a liberation that was more than just physical. The maid gave her a bowl of warm water and a cloth, but Belle washed her own face and unpinned her own hair.

Her curls must have been cowed into submission, because they gave her no trouble as she brushed her hair and braided it for sleep. She felt more herself, now that she was stripped of all the things she didn’t want but had to accept. Belle even took off her mother’s necklace and laid it gently in the box Ermentrude had given her.

She was alone. She was free. She was going to bed.

Without any of her companions to crowd her, Belle stretched out her arms and legs as far as she could. She rolled from one side of the bed to the other, delighting in having so much space for herself.

She wouldn’t have that luxury when she married Gaston, Belle thought sharply. Husbands and wives shared a bed. It was a part of what made a couple married, *wedded and bedded*. It was an aspect of adulthood that Little Claude could not imagine--and that Belle herself could only vaguely understand.

The first night after her wedding was important. That was when the marriage would be consummated. Belle was pretty sure she knew what that meant. She had seen horses put to stud and noticed the rude gestures of the stableboys who had no idea she was watching. And there was a medical text on her bookshelf, a study on male and female anatomy. She knew the facts of copulation. But how to turn facts into understanding?

Of course, she wouldn’t really know until it happened. Until Gaston took her into a bedchamber and they lay together, naked and … And what? Frightened? Happy? How would she feel on her wedding night? How should she feel? How would Gaston--or any husband--want her to feel?

Virgin brides were supposed to be afraid, weren’t they? She had heard stories of girls weeping for their lost virtues, screaming and fighting when their husbands approached. Was that acceptable?
Belle couldn’t imagine a man taking kindly to such a display of emotion. But if she were to act overjoyed and deliriously happy on her wedding night, wouldn’t that be just as off-putting? Wouldn’t a man think her weak and feeble-minded for having any passions at all? Gaston didn’t care about anything except fighting and hunting. Why would he care about her feelings when they were in bed together?

Perhaps he wouldn’t know what to do either. She remembered the Duke’s speech, his offer of assistance on the honeymoon. The Duke was loathsome, but at least he had seen her. At least he had acted like he wanted her, like he would enjoy laying with her, even if she did not enjoy being with him.

Belle was flushed. Her hand felt cold against her cheek. She rubbed her face and realized that she was going to do it again. She tried not to do it very often, but on some nights she couldn’t help herself. Usually the desire was strongest in the last few days before her monthly blood came. She always knew because that was when her breasts became swollen and tender. It hurt to touch them, but it felt good as well.

She could fit one of her breasts in one hand, squeeze it, and rub her nipple with her thumb. It had been a thrill the first time she had noticed her nipple rising and growing hard while she touched it. Playing with her breasts always made her feel strange between her legs.

One time, when she was very small and taking a bath, she had pointed between her legs and asked Ermentrude what that place was called. “It’s where your husband will go,” Ermentrude had answered. “Try not to touch it too much.”

She hadn’t wanted to touch that place for many years, until her bleeding came and her breasts budded and she suddenly had hair down there as well as under her arms and on her legs. Ever since then, since she began to think of herself as a young lady and not just a little girl, Belle had been plagued with strange itches and desires to explore that secret place.

Only rarely did she have a chance. Mathilde and Jeanne took turns sleeping in Belle’s bed. There were always people around her, people who needed something from her. The only time she ever had for herself was when she woke up in the middle of the night and couldn’t sleep. That was when she would touch her body over her shift, clamp her hand between her legs and squeeze as tightly as she could, not knowing what she wanted but only that she wanted it.

Even now she would have to be quick. The party would go on until dawn, but her friends or the servants or even Little Claude could walk into her room at any time. She kept herself hidden under the covers as she pushed her nightgown over her waist.

It had always made sense to Belle that the hair on her body would be as curly as the hair on her head. The hair between her legs was soft and pleasant to touch. Perhaps touching Gaston’s body would be the same. Before she had known that he would be her husband, she had imagined sharing a bed with much older men—with old men, who had gray hair growing from their noses and ears. Widowers, she had imagined, childless men who had taken a young bride to get her pregnant before they died. She imagined their frenzy, their desperation to bed her as often as possible, no matter how disgusted she was by their coarse, hairy bodies.

But Gaston was her age and desperation was not in his character. He didn’t want anything except to hunt and kill and be with his men. Did her body hold any charms for him at all? Did he even want her to bear his children? What would it be like to be his wife? Would she spend the rest of her days abandoned and neglected?

She didn’t deserve that, Belle knew it in her heart. She deserved a man who wanted her, who would
enjoy being with her. It was the way of the world that a woman might be bound to a man she found repulsive—but it was truly cruel that Belle was matched with a man who was repulsed by her as well.

The space between her legs, the place where husbands go, was slippery. That usually happened when she did this, though it was as involuntary was sweat or tears. Sometimes her body had a will of its own, and Belle was left to find ways to give it what it wanted.

Would another man notice if she were neglected in her marriage? Would the Duke speak to his son, admonish him to desire his wife? Her father-in-law had spoken of women, and he had spoken with confidence. Obviously, he had already broken his vows to the Duchess. And he desired her. Belle thought of that large man with his oily skin and fat fingers. That was the sort of husband Belle had trained her mind to accept. He would want her because she was young, because she was beautiful—and because he was neither.

Her father-in-law would bed her if she allowed him to. Perhaps even if she did not. No one says no to their lord. It would be so easy for him to press his suit, to seduce her in front of his own family, to defile her marriage bed while her husband was under the same roof.

Belle’s body jerked sharply and she blinked out of her reverie. As quickly as that, the desire was gone, the need had vanished. After a few breaths, she brought her hand out from between her legs. She tried not to smell the vinegary odor that clung to her fingers. She tried not to remember the shameful, evil thoughts that had occupied her mind so intently.

It was wrong to imagine such things. Wrong and nonsensical. The Duke was awful. He disgusted her—but that disgust had filled the strange need in her belly. And it wasn’t even the man himself who entranced her, but the very thought of being wicked, of wanting forbidden things and having someone who would all but force her to accept them—that was what had satisfied her yearning.

Belle flipped around to lie on her stomach and sleep. There was something wrong with her, she knew. There were strange and monstrous appetites buried deep inside her. She only hoped that they would stay subdued.
The Battle

Chapter Summary

The war gets worse and Belle gets desperate.

The war was getting worse.

Gaston’s reinforcements had given Belle’s people hope. The villagers had thought that with the new supply of fighting men the ogres would be beaten back. And for all that Belle disliked her fiance, she had to admit that his men were well-trained and fearless. With banners held high, they had marched off to defend the farms and villages. They had been hailed as heroes, these veterans of other wars, they were the saviors. With them, and with Gaston to lead the way, everyone knew that the war would be over soon.

But the soldiers were veterans of the wars of men. The ogres slaughtered them and continued their assault on Belle’s people.

Across the land, every temple was repurposed as a field hospital, with the temple in the Belle’s town square the largest of all. Clerics stood by to pray over the dying and the dead. Village women were hastily trained as nurses. Day and night they changed bandages and offered water to the wounded. They stayed beside the frightened young men as they took their last trembling breaths.

Refugees poured into the town surrounding Belle’s castle. People ran from their burned homes to the safety behind stone walls. They stayed with family, with friends, with strangers. And those who had nowhere else to go made haste to the castle, joining the swell of soldiers and servants that already crowded the halls.

Those fleeing from danger came with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the terror in their eyes. Shaking with fear, the refugees would tell the tales of what they’d run from. They said that the ogres doubled in size every time they feasted on human flesh. They said that fire couldn’t hurt them, but only made them hungrier. They said that the adult ogres herded people out onto the fields and made them run until they were so exhausted that the young ogres could make the kill, learning to hunt humans like a cat hunting mice.

Rumors spread like weeds, but the reports that most worried Belle were the farmers who said they had to leave their crops in the field as they ran for their lives. Belle was the head of her father’s household now. Feeding people was her responsibility. She met with the steward every day to arrange for the feeding and sheltering of everyone in the castle.

But the population of the castle was increasingly made up of farmers. Harvest was coming but there was no one to bring in the wheat and fruits. Fields were burned and the roads were not safe to travel. Gaston’s army also had an unfortunate habit of “commandeering” anything edible that it came across. The weekly market day was a dismal affair, though Belle gladly paid silver to anyone who brought anything to sell. But the farmers who paid their taxes in oats and apples had nothing to offer the castle but their helplessness.

Belle knew it was their duty to take in everyone who sought shelter at the castle door. It was the sacred pact between lords and common folk: that her people would be cared for when care was
needed. But now when care was needed most, Belle had so little to give them.

Night after night she poured over her mother’s ledger books. Day after day she examined their storerooms, wracking her brain for some cost she could cut, some surplus she could draw from to keep her people fed. But she found nothing. There was nothing she could do to help them if the war kept up.

In the darkest parts of her mind, Belle found herself wondering if it would be better if the war was never won. Wouldn’t it be easier if they were overrun by the ogres? Wouldn’t being burned up or eaten alive be a quicker death than starvation?

But she never voiced those thoughts aloud. She couldn’t tell her friends and cousins how dire their situation could become. And she could never dishonor the men who fought by saying that their fight was in vain, that they had died for nothing. Every breath she took was a victory, Belle told herself. Every sunrise that saw the castle still standing was a triumph. No matter what the future held, she had to keep hope that there would be a future.

She couldn’t give up.

Belle longed for the simpler times, her childhood—or even her girlhood of a year ago. Back when there was peace in the land and she could sleep at night without dreading what would happen in the morning. Would she ever know such quiet bliss again?

When she was a girl, her father’s study had been one of Belle’s favorite rooms in the castle. This was were the books were kept—the histories and the town records and the Encyclopaedia of Magickal Creatures and a few others. The room had been silent and empty for much of every day and Belle had spent hours alone with her books. More than once she had sat so quietly in a corner that Sir Maurice had conducted full meetings without anyone noticing that she was there.

Today, the men in the study noticed her when she arrived for a meeting with her father. No longer was the chamber a place for quiet contemplation. Now it was a war room. Tables lined the walls and young men in uniforms planned and pushed stone figures back and forth over hastily-drawn maps. Pages rushed in and out delivering messages to and from the front lines. Soldiers walked around or stood guard, some still wearing armor splashed with mud and blood. Belle heard voices raised in an argument—voices that hushed when she approached.

The highest-ranking men in the war stood around a large table in the center of the room. The map on the table was familiar to Belle—it covered the whole of her father’s lands, from the forests to the farmland to the town. She had learned geography on that map when she was little. Now it was covered with carved figures that represented towns and houses and ogres. They were using it to mark the places where there had been attacks, places where there had been battles, places where the ogres had won.

Sir Maurice sat in his chair of office at the head of the table. Gaston and two of her uncles were both breathing heavily, as though all three of them had just stopped shouting at once. Her cousin Andre stood at the corner nearest the door, his brow furrowed in distress. Gaston’s favorite lieutenant—the foolish-looking little man who had toasted them at the betrothal feast—was sneering.

Belle clutched her ledger books over her chest, as though shielding herself that way would make her less female and therefore more acceptable in a war room.

“Belle!” her father stood up when he saw her. “Come in. Give us your report, dearest.”

“The report,” Belle approached the table and stood by Andre, setting her books on top of the map.
“The report is... dire. The counted intake of crops is less than a third of what they were last year. The few farms that are still intact don’t have enough hands to bring in the harvest because the men are fighting, or--aren’t able to help.” Belle offered the polite way to say that a good number of her people were dead.

“We can send some soldiers home until the harvest comes in,” Andre offered. “Call it a plow furlough and tell them to come back to us with a full wagon when they can.”

Gaston snorted. “Send men home? So the ogres can pick off my army one by one instead of facing them in a real fight? What nonsense!”

“We have to do something.” It was Belle’s Uncle Armand, saying what Belle had been thinking.

“Yes,” Gaston said, “the something we have to do is fight! We can worry about food later.”

“Later?” That was Uncle Pierre, Andre’s father. “People are hungry now, boy. It’s only thanks to Belle’s good management that we haven’t had famine and riots.”

“Please,” Gaston rolled his eyes. “Your peasants know that the only thing keeping them alive is my army. They just have to tighten their belts and learn to make sacrifices.”

“If we don’t get a supply of food in soon,” Belle announced, “then we won’t be able to keep the soldiers on full rations.”

Gaston blanched. “Are you mad? You can’t starve the army!”

“That’s what she was telling you,” Uncle Armand was clearly trying very hard not to shout. “Everyone needs there to be food in the granaries. Even the army. So if we don’t take action, everyone will suffer. But I imagine Belle has some suggestions?”

Belle nodded, hiding her quiet gratification at seeing her family come to her defense. “My first idea is to beseech our allies in Gaston’s kingdom. Would your father be any help to us?”

“My father has his own people to feed, woman. And he’s paying for the wedding as well, though that ought to be the bride’s family’s responsibility. I’m not going to ask him for anything else.”

“You’d rather starve than give up your pride?” Uncle Pierre asked snidely.

“Hey!” Gaston’s lieutenant snapped. “This isn’t our war! We’re only fighting and dying for you people because Gaston tells us to! Have some respect, old man!”

“Don’t talk about my father that way!” Andre shouted. “You stupid little--”

“Stop, both of you,” Sir Maurice said with a weariness Belle had never known from him. How many times had he played peacemaker in a war room? How many petty fights had he ended between factions among people who were supposed to be on the same side? “You two make me glad I didn’t have sons. Belle, darling, what was your next suggestion?”

Belle gathered herself. “If the Duke will not be forthcoming, then we are compelled to ask the king for help.”

Her father nodded. “I agree. In fact, I’ve been in correspondence with King Midas and just received an answer this morning.”

Gaston looked up. “You didn’t tell me that.”
Sir Maurice continued. “The King regrets that he is unable to send cartloads of food or regiments of men over the mountains to get to us before the winter snows set in. He writes that it is not a question of resources, but of time and weather. Personally, I imagine he has heard reports of how useless mere numbers are when fighting against an enemy like ogres. We’re learning how men can do nothing but die.”

Gaston bristled. “So you have nothing?”

“No,” Sir Maurice answered. “The king sent out a group of riders who were able to travel more swiftly than a caravan. They arrived last night in secret and left before dawn this morning.”

“What did they give us?” Andre asked what Belle was wondering.

“Gold,” Sir Maurice said. “A chest of gold, with instructions to buy food from our neighboring lords as they bring in their harvest.”

“Food?” Gaston’s face looked as though it couldn’t decide between shock or disgust. “For the peasants? With a chest of gold we could buy a catapult that would rain fire down on the ogre’s heads!”

“But without food, your soldiers won’t have the strength to turn the crank,” Uncle Armand said calmly. “It all comes back to the most basic essentials: food and shelter.”

Just then, a page burst through the doors and ran to Belle’s father. He was a little boy, Belle noticed as he handed Sir Maurice a message. She recognized him. The boy used to catch rats in the kitchens and present them to the cook in exchange for tarts. But now this child was going back and forth to a war zone.

As her father read the message, Belle saw the color drain from his face. He set the parchment face down on the table and looked up at the war council in stunned silence.

“What is it, Papa?”

After a moment, Sir Maurice’s eyes found her and he spoke. “They… are in the town.”

The men around the table shifted their feet and looked at each other, clearly not believing what they had heard.

“Say that again, Maurice,” Uncle Armand said softly.

“The ogres,” his voice trembled as he spoke. “They have broken through the outer wall. And they are coming in to the town.”

“Gods,” Andre whispered.

Gaston was the first one to pull himself together. “Rouse the troops!” his voice boomed to his soldiers. “We are under attack at this very moment! Every man is to go to the wall and push them back! The walking wounded can stay to defend the castle, but tell every Frontland man if he can hold a pike, he’s going to the front lines!”

“Wait!” Belle reached out to grab Gaston’s arm as he strode away. “There are still people in the town, hundreds of civilians! How are they to get to safety?”

“That’s their affair,” he shook her off and went to join his men.
Belle stood still for a moment, trying not to shake at her rage. That was the man she was going to marry. He was going to rule these people someday! How could he have no consideration for anything but his precious army?

She felt a hand on her shoulder and she turned and looked. Andre.

“I’ll organize the evacuation, Belle. You’re right, people need to get out of there.”

Her anger melted and Belle threw her arms around her cousin. “Send the helpless to the castle, but if anyone wants to stay, let them form a bucket brigade. The fires are as big a threat as the ogres.”

Andre gave Belle a salute and a smile. “I’ll take care of it,” he said, and ran off to his men.

The town was under attack, Belle thought as she walked dazedly back to her chambers. If the town fell, the castle would be the last safe place. If the castle fell, they would all perish. Perhaps Gaston was right. There was no need for food if they weren’t going to survive the winter. What if they didn’t even survive the night?

She was only vaguely aware of coming back to her chambers, of telling her women that they would have to expect even more refugees, of asking the servants to clear a space in the Great Hall so that there would be room for all these new people. She had the cook prepare a vat of soup and a cauldron of warmed wine--comforting foods that would feed a crowd easily. Even if the townsfolk weren’t hungry, having food would give them something to do during what would surely be a long and terrible night.

The people came in a hushed throng. Women and children, the injured and the elderly, they came through the castle gates under a night sky that was red with fire. They carried bundles of their belongings, the heirlooms and essentials they couldn’t bear to leave behind. All of them, Belle noticed, had the same expression, the same shock and befuddlement that she had felt so many times since this war had started. This isn’t happening, their faces said. Not really, not to me. Not here, not in this safe place. It’s not real.

But it was real. Belle had learned that lesson over and over again. It was real and they could do nothing to stop it.

She welcomed them with a brave smile and a kind word, and they looked to her and nodded and for a moment their faces were not haunted. She asked for volunteers to stand on the castle walls with water and be on the lookout for fires. Boys and young women rose to the challenge and Belle could see the relief on their faces, the courage that came from a sense of purpose. That, too, was a feeling Belle knew. It lifted her spirits to help these brave souls by giving them an occupation. Sometimes orders could be a gift.

The mothers and grandparents carried their children into the Great Hall and settled themselves along the walls, sitting on benches or lying on the ground. Some of the children were too young to understand the danger--they played and ran and the sound of their laughter was alien and wrong. Little Claude joined in the peasant children’s play. Mathilde and Jeanne took it upon themselves to watch over the little ones, sitting some in a circle to listen to stories, letting others run off their energy with racing games. They would make wonderful mothers, Belle thought, if they ever got the chance.

There was a fire in the hearth, to keep everyone warm enough in the cool autumn night. If she tried, Belle could make herself believe that was the only fire she smelled. The woodsmoke was coming from the hearth, the smell of roasting meat was coming from the kitchens.
But she could not make herself believe that the howls and roars and screams were anything but the sounds of men dying and ogres celebrating. She had the servants close the doors but she could not block out the noise.

To keep herself from hearing, Belle spoke. “Is there anything anyone needs?” she asked the people. “Is there enough food for the children?”

Mothers nodded and there was a general consensus of satisfaction under the circumstances. Belle couldn’t believe that. Surely they needed something and they weren’t telling her.

She saw a familiar face in the crowd. “Madame Nanette!” she called. The wise woman would know what the others needed. “Is there anything you need?”

The old witch shook her head. She was the only person in the hall who did not seem afraid. Her eyes were clear and sharp. “We’re well cared for, Lady Belle, all of us.”

There were murmurs of agreement which Belle could not believe. How did they not want more from her? She had been doing her best, but she knew how little that truly was. How could they be calm and content when the monsters were literally outside their door?

Belle voiced her confusion out loud. “But there must be something?”

Again, Madame Nanette shook her head. “You’ve done what you could and you’ve done it well, milady. Whatever happens next is nothing to do with you.”

Copying Madame Nanette, Belle shook her head. That wasn’t true. She was responsible for them. She had a duty.

“I need something.” A child’s voice cut through the silence. It was a young girl, with dark brown hair and wide brown eyes. She pushed her way through the crowd, with her mother chasing after her.

“Alix!” the harried woman scolded. “Don’t trouble Lady Belle with your nonsense!”

“Oh, no,” Belle said. “Please, let her come.” She bent down to look the girl in the eye. “What do you need, dear?”

Alix’s eyes shifted around while she looked at the crowd. The girl was not a child, but nor did she have any marks of womanhood on her body yet. Under her worn and patched dress, her body was straight and skinny. Her hair was lank and fell into her eyes. She pushed it back as she spoke.

“I need to know, Lady Belle. I need to know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Do?” Belle asked. “But you’re a child, dear. No one needs you to do anything.”

Alix clenched her jaw. “The older girls get to help,” she said. “The men get to fight and the boys get to carry buckets. But don’t get to do anything.” Her plea had become a whine, childish in her desperation. “I want to help!”

Belle closed her mouth before she opened it again. She saw herself reflected in this child. Her world had been just as shaken as Alix’s and she knew--so clearly--the desire to set it back to rights. The only difference was that the girl had no idea how impossible a wish that was to grant.

“You’re already doing the right thing, Alix,” Belle assured her. “You’re keeping yourself safe. You’re staying close to your mother--that’s very important! You’re looking for ways that you can help. The only thing left for any of us to do right now is to offer up our prayers that the gods will
keep us safe and send the ogres back where they came from.”

“I’ve been praying!” Alix looked about to cry. “We all have! Mama prays with me every night! All summer we prayed that the gods will make the ogres go away, but the ogres are still here!”

Belle was at a loss for that. Offering to pray had always been the end of any discussion of misfortune. Pray for a solution, pray for comfort, pray for peace and understanding the will of the gods when the suffering didn’t stop. But the suffering had never stopped, and there was no way to ask this child to understand that the gods seemed to want her to live in fear and die in agony.

Ermentrude stepped into the conversation. “You must pray anyway, child. No matter how dire the circumstances, we all must continue to beseech the gods. We must ask them to have mercy on us.”

“But the gods don’t answer!” Alix shrieked, blasphemous in her rage.

“The gods always answer,” Ermentrude said with a conviction that could have crushed stone. “Even if they do not give us what they want, they always listen. They always answer. Even if the answer is no.”

Alix’s mother took her away before the girl could argue further. The crowd dispersed and Belle was left standing by herself. She found a spot on a bench by the wall and sat down for the first time all day.

It was hard for her to take a full breath. When she tried, the air came out shuddering and shallow. Belle rubbed her face and felt her closed eyelids throbbing against her fingers. She was so tired. It had been dark that morning when she had woken up, and it was dark again now. Her body was hurting--her feet, her legs, her stomach, her head. Everything ached. All Belle wanted was to rest.

“Do you still want some work, Lady Belle?” Madame Nannette walked up to her, bouncing a baby on her hip.

Belle blinked several times to shift her focus away from her own exhaustion. “Yes, of course. What do you need?”

“Hold this,” the old woman held the baby out for Belle to take.

Belle accepted the infant without thinking. It was a fat little thing, under a year old, very contentedly making bubbles from its drool. Automatically, Belle began to bounce it on her knees.

“Where’s the mother?” Belle asked Madame Nanette, who had taken a seat beside her.

“Outside, weeping herself sick. Her man is fightin’, y’see, and she’s afraid he won’t come back.”

Belle held the baby a little closer. “She’s not wrong,” she said softly. “It’s bad out there.”

“But we’re in here.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re safe.”

“No, but it means we can’t change what’s happening out there. We can only care for what’s here in front of us.”

The baby was what was in front of Belle, but it couldn’t be her only focus. She had to have a larger perspective than that. She had to help everyone. “That can’t be true, Madame,” she said. “I have to be able to do something. I have to try.”
“Are you going to fight an ogre, milady?”

“No, of course not.” Belle sighed. “I suppose all I can do now is pray.”

Madame Nanette let a moment pass before she asked, “What did you think of that little girl? Do you think gods don’t listen?”

“They might well listen,” Belle answered. “But they clearly haven’t seen fit to act. And the king won’t help us, and the Duke won’t help us. And there’s no one left to ask.”

Again Madame Nanette was silent. Belle looked over at her and saw the old witch giving her a knowing look.

“What is it?” Belle asked. “Do you know something?”

“It’s more that I’m surprised you don’t know something, milady. Don’t they tell children proper stories anymore? Stories about the true powers of the world?”

Belle rocked along with the baby in her arms. “Is there something in the world more powerful than a god?”

“Certainly he’s more powerful than any god who hasn’t helped.”

“He?” Belle asked. “A person?”

“More or less,” Madame Nanette nodded. “Much more and much less. He is powerful, milady, and he will give us what we need. But he must be called, and he must be paid.”

“Paid,” Belle repeated the word as she tried to think of who or what the old woman was talking about. “Can’t you say his name?”

She snorted. “Never! You say his name and he’ll start watching you. Say it twice and you’re inviting him to come into your life. Three times and you’re commanding him, and he don’t take kindly to being commanded.” She shook her head. “But he comes when he’s called and he follows his rules, so long as he gets his price.”

Belle raised her head as she realized. “Are you talking about the Dark One?”

Madame Nanette nodded. “He won’t come for the likes of me, I’ve nothing to give him. But you, milady, you so young and full of promise. There is much he can take from you.”

One summer at the lodge, Mathilde had dared Belle to speak the Dark One’s full name out loud. It had been late at night and all the girls were silly and excitible. Encouraged by her friends, Belle had lit a candle in a dark room and spoke the name at the stroke of midnight while looking into a mirror. If the magic worked, she was supposed to see his demonic face looking back at her—but all she had seen was darkness.

“But the Dark One is just a story,” Belle sighed. “Nothing happens when you call him.”

“Doesn’t it?” Madame Nanette asked with her eyebrows raised.

Belle sat up. “Do you really think he’s real? Have you dealt with him before? What does he take in exchange for his magic?”

“Oh, he’s real, but I’ve never called him. Never needed anything that much. I’ve heard he takes what’s most precious to us, usually children.” Madame Nanette wriggled a crooked finger at the
baby in Belle’s arms, tickling the child until it laughed.

There was nothing about the Dark One in the *Encyclopaedia of Magickal Creatures*. Anything that was known about him was spread by word of mouth, just as Belle had heard now. Stories spread by the fireside late at night, never agreeing on all the same details. No one knew what the Dark One really was. No one knew if he--it was usually *he*, but sometimes *it*--was a wizard or a demon or some unholy corruption of a mortal man.

The stories said that he could do anything--make a castle disappear, turn a prince into a frog, even turn straw into gold--but all at a terrible price. He would demand a maiden’s first born child, or take an old man’s memories. And there was no cheating the Dark One. His deals were binding down to the very soul.

If Belle asked him to stop this war, what would he ask of her in return? How much would she be willing to pay?

Before she could give the matter any more thought, Gaston’s fat lieutenant burst into the hall with a team of soldiers. “Clear this space! Get these people out of here!”

Belle stood up and handed the baby back to Madame Nanette. She rushed over to the fat man.

“What’s happening outside?”

“Nothing good. We need a place to put the wounded so we’re commandeering the hall. You’ll have to relocate all this rabble.”

“They’ve already been relocated! We told them they’d be safe here! What happened to the field hospital they set up in the temple?”

“It’s a morgue now,” the man said bitterly. “But we can’t stop the battle to dig graves.”

Belle covered her mouth with her hand. “So the wounded are coming here?”

He nodded. “Gaston ordered us to retreat to the castle, and bring anyone still breathing. It’ll be dawn soon. The ogres will leave, but they’ll come back.”

“You lost,” Belle whispered. “We lost.”

“We lived to fight another day.”

“So we die tomorrow instead of tonight, that’s wonderful!” Belle caught herself before her fear and anger made her break down completely. “Apologies,” she said to Gaston’s friend. “I will clear away a space for the doctors to tend the wounded.”

It was daylight before Belle had found enough places in the castle for all the villagers who had been displaced. After a night of fear, all anyone wanted to do was sleep. She took a group of women into her own chambers, had them lie on her couches and camp out on the floor with the pillows from her bed. She gave Madame Nanette a couch of her own. Alix and her mother curled up together near the fireplace. Instead of sleeping with just Mathilde, Belle invited Jeanne and Little Claude to stay in her bed while the village women piled together on the trundle.

Cramped and frightened, Belle’s body forced her to sleep, even as she dreaded what would happen when she woke.
Belle didn’t want to wake up. Late afternoon sunlight streamed into her closed eyes and she could hear the bustle of the village women in her chamber waking up and getting ready. But all Belle wanted to do was stay in the darkness forever. Little Claude was snoring next to her and Belle wrapped her arm around her cousin like a child clinging to a soft toy.

She could stay asleep. As long as she stayed asleep she wouldn’t have to leave her bed, and as long as she stayed in bed she wouldn’t have to go out and see the devastation the ogres had wrought. She could stay still, stay in the dark, the warmth, the comfort of her bed. She could stay ignorant of the pain that was happening around her. She could stay safe.

But who would keep everyone else safe?

The question made Belle open her eyes and remember her duty. She had to protect her people. She had to face the world, no matter the terrors. She had to wake up and try to make life less terrible.

How had the battle gone last night? How many men were left to fight, to defend the castle? How much time did they have left? What would happen next? What could they do, what could she do?

Pushing herself up to sit, Belle looked around her chamber. Mathilde and Jeanne were out of bed and arranging each other’s hair. The village women she had invited to stay with her were brushing the wrinkles out of the clothes they had slept in. They busied themselves by folding the blankets they had used the night before, setting them all into a pile by the bed. Madame Nanette sat on the couch she had slept in, comforting a young woman holding a fat baby.

Even the children were awake, most of them helping their mothers and a few getting into mischief. Alix sat alone by the fireplace, blinking slowly out of her daze. Only Little Claude remained completely asleep. Belle climbed over her to get to the wash basin.

As Belle was splashing water onto her face, she heard Alix’s voice. “Good morning, Lady Belle.”

“Good morning, Alix,” Belle said. “Did you sleep well?”

“No,” the girl said simply. “I had nightmares. I’ve had nightmares ever since Papa died.”

“Oh,” Belle said, shocked less by the revelation about Alix’s family than by the matter-of-fact tone in which the girl delivered the news. “I’m so sorry.”

She looked at Belle perplexedly. “It’s not your fault.”

“No, but, it’s a terrible thing to lose a parent.” She knew that well enough.
Alix nodded and looked around the room. “Everybody’s lost somebody.”

“I know,” Belle said. She didn’t tell the girl that it was going to get worse, that they themselves were in danger now, and that there was no hope of rescue. Only a miracle could keep them from losing more people.

“What are you going to wear today?”

Belle blinked. “What?”

“To wear,” Alix said. “You have a lot of dresses, don’t you?”

“A few,” Belle answered. She hadn’t thought about her wardrobe in weeks. She trusted Mathilde and Jeanne to keep her looking presentable, trusted Ermentrude to tell her when she appeared less than ladylike.

“I only have one dress,” Alix indicated the washed-out gray wool she wore over her linen shift.

“What dress do you think I should wear? I can show you them all.”

“You should wear whichever dress is fanciest, Lady Belle. You should wear your most ladylike dress, your prettiest dress.”

Belle’s heart felt strangely warmed at Alix’s desire. Even in the midst of all the pain and fear, this girl wanted to see something pretty. It was such a normal thing to want.

“My prettiest dress is the gown made in honor of my engagement to Sir Gaston. I wasn’t going to wear it again until my wedding. Why do you think I should wear it today?”

“Because…” Alix twisted her hands as she thought. Belle saw her eyes grow wide when she found her answer. “Because if you don’t wear it today, I’ll never get to see it.” The girl spoke quickly, almost babbling. “You’re going to go away to get married, Mama says. Or what if something bad happens before your wedding? What if we—”

“Alix stop!” Belle cut the girl off before she could speak those fears into existence. Even if she was right, dwelling on it would do them no good. Not anymore. Belle knelt and put her hand on Alix’s cheek, looking her in the eye to make a promise: “It will be alright. You will see me wear my wedding dress.”

The girl’s brown eyes held so much wariness, so much despair, that Belle could see only the tiniest spark of hope inside them. Alix’s voice was small when she asked, “Today?”

Belle couldn’t rebuild her home or bring back the people she had lost or even keep the girl from having nightmares. But she could do this. It was such a small wish, but she could grant it, and that might make all the difference.

“Mathilde?” Belle called out. “Will you have the maids ready my golden gown? My friend Alix wants to see me dressed up.”

Getting Belle dressed was a spectacle for everyone. None of the village women were going to miss a chance to see what their lady wore under her skirts. Belle stayed modestly behind a changing screen, but every piece of her clothing was displayed for the women’s approval—which they all gave. They admired the rarity of her silk stockings, the craftsmanship of her boned corset, and all the extravagant details of her beaded bodice.
When Belle emerged from behind the changing screen, everyone hushed. The golden gown was just as impressive today as it had been on the night of the feast.

“Where are your sleeves?” asked Alix in the crowd

“It’s a ball gown,” Belle explained as Mathilde laced her into it. “The sleeves are shortened. It doesn’t need to be practical, just beautiful.”

“So beautiful,” someone murmured.

“It suits you, my lady,” came another voice.

“You look like a queen!”

In the back of the crowd, Madame Nanette didn’t say anything, but she caught Belle’s eye and nodded her approval.

Belle’s heart swelled and she gave them all a genuine smile. “It is enough for me to look like a lady who you can be proud of.”

“We are!” one of the women said.

Jeanne stepped forward. “Do you want me to pin your hair?”

Belle felt her smile freeze. The last thing she wanted was to ruin this enchanted moment with the pain and anguish that invariably came any time her hair touched a brush.

“We haven’t much time,” she said after a moment. “Can you pin it back, instead of up? And I’ll wear Gaston’s hair pin as well.”

“And the necklace,” Mathilde chirped. “You must wear your mother’s necklace.”

“Yes.” Now she could smile freely again. Her friends fussed around her, putting the finishing touches on her ensemble.

When she was done, the women smiled and approved. Even Alix had more light in her eyes after seeing Belle’s finery. The whole process had taken only a half an hour, but it had been a blessed time, a moment of peace and beauty in the midst of all the war that surrounded them. Belle could see it in their faces, the relief, the relaxation, no matter how temporary it was. Dressing Belle up was a reprieve for them, a restoration. And Belle felt better for it too.

Just then, Ermentrude opened the door. For a moment, Belle could see the shock on the older woman’s face, the puzzlement that Belle was wearing a ballgown in the middle of a war, that all these women were crowded around her and that she was letting them. Belle braced herself for a scolding, a lecture on propriety and wasting time and letting people below her class get too close.

But then the look was gone and Ermentrude said nothing about the dress or the women or Belle’s peculiar judgement.

“Your father wishes to see you, my lady. He seeks your council on our way forward.”

Belle stood up from her dressing table, her shoulders squared and her gaze steady. “I will go to him.”

She had to stand tall in this corset, and with the village women striding beside her, Belle felt like a true leader. This gown had become a suit of armor. In it, Belle could face death with dignity and inspire others to do the same.
But then they rounded a corner and Belle saw all the horrors that came before death.

The field hospital had become a morgue, she remembered. So all the wounded had been brought into the castle last night. Apparently they had run out of room in the great hall. Now cots and bedrolls lined the corridors on both sides, leaving only a narrow passage for people to walk through. Doctors leaned over bedsides and the young women trained as nurses were hard at work. They wrapped fresh linen around bloody injuries and held water cups to the mouths of unmoving boys.

Some were missing limbs. Some had bandages wrapped over their faces. Some shook with fever and fright. Some stayed unnaturally still, breathing shallowly as they stared into nothing. So many of them cried and moaned and called out. They called for water, called for Mother, called for help--

“help help!”

“What can we do for them?” Belle spoke loudly to block out the sound of them in her ears. “We must do something!”

Ermentrude placed a gentle hand on Belle’s arm. “I will organize the ladies to give them comfort--serve up strong wine and clean water, put cool cloths on their foreheads to ease the pain and fevers. We will help them, my lady, as well as we can. You must go to your father and find out what we will do next.”

Belle breathed a sigh of relief. It could be such a joy to be told exactly what to do. “Thank you, Ermentrude,” she said. She turned around and addressed her ladies and the other women. “Listen to Ermentrude and the doctors. These men gave of their bodies to keep us safe, the least we can do is nurse them to health. And doing good work will keep your spirits up. So go to it, I’ll join you all shortly.”

What help were they really providing to these men? They were dying and delirious, what comfort could they derive from water and soft words? The work she had told the women to do was for their benefit, not for the wounded. There was no help for the injured now. Nothing short of an act of the gods could heal them.

But the gods weren’t helping, Belle thought bitterly. And what force was more powerful than the gods?

All around her, the women bustled over to the wounded, offered them whatever solace could be found. Only Alix stayed still, looking up at Belle with her large, brown eyes. She didn’t look afraid, so Belle couldn’t let her own fear show.

“What do you need, dear?”

“If I grow up, I want to be like you.”

Belle pressed her lips together. “I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you do grow up, Alix.”

But how much could she do? And how much would it cost?

There were only three men around the table today--her father, Gaston and Uncle Armand--and the map they had was not of the village, but only the castle where they had arranged models of fortifications and escape routes. There were guards at the door and a few lieutenants awaiting orders, but that was all. There had been so many men here only yesterday. How was it now that the others were gone?

“Is Andre with his troops?” Belle asked as she approached them. “And Uncle Pierre, why isn’t he at
this meeting? Surely they can’t all be... away.” She trailed off in the face of their silent, gray faces.

“Oh,” Belle whispered, when she realized what they could not say. “All of them?”

“Yes,” her father said softly.

Belle closed her eyes pressed her hands over her mouth. “Our family,” was all she could say.

“The ogres are beasts who care nothing about rank,” Gaston said. “They’ll tear the head off a general just as easily as a private, crush their skulls inside their monstrous hands.”

“I hope you don’t speak so carelessly in front of all the women,” Uncle Armand chastised Gaston and placed a comforting hand on Belle’s shoulder.

She steadied herself by stroking the worn wood table under her hands, focusing on the details of the map, feeling the slight heat of her uncle next to her. They were gone. Her cousin, her uncle, so many others. No one had told Jeanne and Little Claude that their brother was dead. Their brother and father both. Did Aunt Therese know? Belle had seen her aunt in the crowd of women, but hadn’t had the chance to speak to her yet. She would have to find her when this meeting was over. She would have to be the one to tell them all this terrible news.

The men kept arguing, and Belle heard but did not care.

“Maurice, I told you we needed better weapons,” Gaston said. “This tragedy could have been avoided if my men had been properly equipped.”

Uncle Armand rolled his eyes. “A sword as large as your ego wouldn’t have been enough to stop those monsters, you idiot boy!”

“Stop it, both of you.” Sir Maurice stood up between his future son-in-law and his only living brother. “We have enemies aplenty without, we cannot afford enemies within.”

“Our enemy will be within soon enough,” Gaston said. “And we’ve proven that we can’t fight them. So I say we run.”

“Run?” Armand spat out the word. “Run to where? This castle is the safest fortress within twenty miles. Can you take an entire village twenty miles before nightfall?”

“I don’t need an entire village,” Gaston looked at Belle. “A small group could make it to the nearest castle. Fast horses could carry a few men--even with a woman slowing us down.”

Belle blinked at him, pulling herself out of her mournful thoughts. “What?”

Her father spoke, “It’s very important to get you to safety, Belle. You are the heir, after all.”

“You mean to take me away?” She gaped at him. “Because I am your heir? Papa, if the ogres get through the walls, I will be heir to nothing but rubble.” Sadness was slowly giving way to anger in her heart. “I will not leave my home, Papa. I will not leave my people. I will not leave what’s left of my family!”

“You are my wife,” Gaston snapped.

“Not yet I’m not!” Belle shouted as loudly as he did. Anger was such a relief. “I will not leave for my own safety while everyone I love dies screaming!”

“But you must live,” Uncle Armand said softly. He reached out and placed his hand over her cheek.
“You are so young, little Belle. Wasn’t it only yesterday that you and Andre were playing knights and dragons?” His eyes were warm. “You deserve to live.”

Belle put her hand over her uncle’s, her brief rage replaced with concern. “We all deserve to live.”

“But that isn’t going to happen,” Gaston said through gritted teeth. “You all know I’m the last one to shirk from a fight, but ogres cannot be defeated by men.”

“Then we must ask for help from something else.” Belle spoke quickly, before she could change her mind.

Her father looked at her. “What do you mean, dear?”

“Magic,” she answered. They would think she was mad or a fool, but she had to try.

“Fairies don’t fight wars for humans,” Gaston dismissed her suggestion. “My father’s asked them before. And there are no magical weapons that could get to us in time—and even if there were, a man must be trained in how to use such items or else they’re more dangerous to the user than to the enemy.”

Belle blinked at her fiance. “I didn’t know you knew so much about magic.”

Gaston shrugged. “I want to hurt my enemies any way I can.”

“Have you ever researched… dark magic?”

His eyes were blue, Belle realized as he stared at her. Was this the first time she had noticed? Was this the first time her fiance had looked her in the eye? Was this really the first time they had ever agreed about anything, ever really talked to each other? This was the first question she had ever put to him that was more than small talk, the first time she had ever cared about his answer.

Gaston noticed it too, that he was interested in her, that for the first time they had a spark, a connection. He seemed pleasantly surprised as he told her, “There is no better magic for killing than dark magic.”

“Children, listen to yourselves!” Uncle Armand pleaded. “Do you have any idea what manner of forces you would be invoking?”

“We must do something, Uncle. This seems to be the only option we have left.”

“Maurice, stop them!”

Her father’s eyes were tired as he looked at Gaston. “My boy, what do you really know about dark magic?”

He cleared his throat. “I am no magic-maker, you all know that. But I have seen supernatural things, and I believe that such powers may be useful.”

“You have only seen charlatans and illusionists--tricksters and confidence men!”

Gaston shook his head at Armand, his face deadly serious. “My friend, Prince James, was once stabbed through the heart. The sword went clear through his body and out the other side. He was dead. And then King George called on dark magic. A week later, James was walking and talking, fit enough to slay a dragon!”

“That cannot be true,” Uncle Armand said. “Even with magic, dead is dead.”
“I know what I saw,” Gaston said gruffly. “My kingdom has a prince today because of dark magic. I see no reason why we shouldn’t call on the same powers for help.”

“What do you think, Papa?” But it didn’t matter what he thought. She was going to do it anyway. She had to. “Should we call Rumpelstiltskin?”

There was a sharp intake of breath, not only from the men at the table but from the guards at the doors and the lieutenants who were not supposed to be eavesdropping. They all unsheathed their swords at the sound of the name, ready to fight the monster in any form it took.

But nothing happened. No one appeared. It was fine, just as Belle had known it would be. He wouldn’t come until the third time she said his name.

Gaston let out air through his teeth. “What are you doing, woman? No one says that name!”

“Then how does everyone know what it is?” Something in Belle had snapped and she now felt strangely untethered. Speaking her mind like this was madness, but so was everything else that had happened to her since the start of this awful, evil, war. “Besides, we want him here, don’t we? Isn’t that what we decided? Weren’t we going to ask Rumpelstiltskin for help?”

“Belle, stop!” her father cried.

“Even if it is only a superstition,” Armand spoke calmly, as though he were talking sense into a lunatic, “surely there are some monsters that should not be poked, some taboos that must not be broken.”

Belle tried to keep her calm. Why didn’t they understand? This was the answer! They only had to be brave enough to ask for it! “Uncle, think! Can we defend the castle against the ogres?”

“I fear that we cannot.”

“And Gaston, can your army attack them in a battlefield?”

“I already told you, we can’t.”

“So, Papa, are we going to let our people be wiped out? Will our family line end today? Will the castle built by your grandfather crumble under the feet of ogres?”

Sir Maurice turned his head away from her, unable to answer one way or another.

Uncle Armand spoke up. “It is known that the Dark One must always be paid for his magic.”

“There is that gold from King Midas,” Gaston said.

“Whose side are you on?” Sir Maurice grumbled.

“The side of the living, if I have a choice.” Gaston took a step backwards, away from the table and the map and the plans that failed them over and over. “Your daughter is right, Maurice. We’re out of options.”

A surge of triumph ran through Belle at her future husband’s words. He had never said that she was right about anything. He had never said that anyone was right about anything. Was he actually changing before her very eyes? Was he becoming a man Belle could actually bear to live with?

Uncle Armand was unconvincéd. “If we pay the Dark One with gold, how will we eat this winter?”
“We’ll find a way,” Gaston said. “With the ogres gone, we might yet make a harvest, forge our swords into plowshares as they say. Or we can borrow money again, or I can ask my father. Or we can just ask my wife to think of something!”

Her fiance smiled at her, and for the first time in their engagement she enjoyed smiling back. “Do you really trust me?”

“I don’t know about trust,” Gaston scratched his head, “but I agree with you. The only way to end this bloodshed is to make a deal with the devil.”

Belle looked at her father, who shook his head but said nothing, and at her uncle, who had his hands to his lips in a silent prayer. “I’m going to do it,” she announced, excitement overshadowing any trepidation. “I’m going to say the name a third time.” She put her hands on the table and spoke, “Rumpelstiltskin—”

“Technically,” a new voice entered the conversation, “the three-times thing is more of a formality than a binding rule.”

Belle’s mouth went dry and her stomach dropped. The door was still shut. The guards were still in place. There was no way someone could have entered the room without being stopped and known.

But there he was. A small figure with a long, black, shadow loomed over the far end of the table. He was closest to Belle, standing opposite her father, the object of everyone’s rapt attention.

Belle’s first impression was of the spikes that covered his coat, adding texture to the darkness of his clothes. Was that what a demon looked like? The shape was more like that of an imp--spritely, and thin as a blade. It--he?--had dark skin that caught the evening light strangely, sometimes glimmering gold and sometimes shadowing into gray. His eyes seemed to blaze with their own black fire--sharp and glinting and evil. But he wore clothes like a man and seemed uninterested in attacking them.

The guards rushed at him with their swords drawn, and only then did he raise his hand. With a simple, magical motion he pushed them back against the wall. The men struggled to break free, but couldn’t even move their heads.

The monster’s eyes stayed on the map of the castle. Casually, he picked up one of the models that represented a fallen village and began throwing it into the air with one hand, catching it neatly without looking at it. His head rocked slightly as he examined at the map and the plans, still tossing the model and catching it over and over. Everyone stared at him as he made a game of their tragedy.

Finally, Uncle Armand spoke. “You… are the Dark One?”

“No more and no less.” The creature looked up at them and his face broke into a wide, wicked grin. His teeth were black and broken. He tossed the model to one of the lieutenants and gave them a courtly bow. “Rumpelstiltskin,” he introduced himself with his eyes on Belle, “at your service.”

“Thank you for coming so promptly.” Gaston spoke before Belle could say anything. He addressed the Dark One as though he were talking to a tradesman he’d hired or a minor lord he was asking for a favor--someone who deserved politeness, but not terror. “We were afraid that—”

“I know.” There was a terrible stillness about the Dark One, the pause of a snake before it struck. “I can smell your fears, all of them.”

“We ask you for help,” Belle’s father said slowly.

“You asked me for nothing!” He jumped into motion, gesturing grandly. “If there is a deal to be
made tonight, I won’t be making it with you!”

“Make it with me,” Belle said quickly. “I’m the one who called you, no one else.”

“Correct!” The Dark One held up his hands in a flourish. He began to saunter towards Belle. “So what can I do… for you?”

“Destroy the ogres,” she said at once. “Save my people. Help us, please!”

“Please,” he repeated with childish glee. “Such a love-er-ly word!”

“Can you do as we ask?” Gaston said.

“Of course I can,” the Dark One said. “Ogres have become something of my speciality. The real question is,” he looked at Belle again. “Can you pay the price?”

He was talking to her, asking her, but before she could speak, she heard her father’s chair scraping against the stone floor. Sir Maurice stood up and went to a chest by the wall. He took a key from his belt and unlocked the chest, pulling out a large leather pouch. He carried the pouch in both hands and set it on the table in front of the Dark One.

“King Midas loaned us one thousand pieces of gold,” he said when he was back by his chair, standing now like all the rest of them. “Help us, and you can have it all.”

The Dark One giggled. “Gold?” he asked, incredulous. “Is that the best you have to offer?”

He opened the pouch and set his long fingers to play among the coins, picking them up like pebbles from a stream. He held one coin between two black fingernails and tossed it in the air, catching it just as he had caught the model before. Belle watched the coin as he threw it again and again. She saw it change in the air, turning from gold to silver to wood and finally to dirt, which poured down from the air and piled onto the table. Then the Dark One slammed his hand onto the table and everyone jumped.

But when he moved his hand away, the dirt had transformed back into a gold coin. No, not a coin, Belle saw, but a blank disc of gold. The seal of King Midas was nowhere to on the metal. It was entirely the Dark One’s creation.

“So you see I, uh, make gold. You’ll need offer me something better.”

“What is your price, then?” Uncle Armand said cautiously. “You know what you want, demon. Don’t wait for us to guess it.”

“I want something precious,” the Dark One said as he circled the table. “Something irreplaceable, valued and adored by everyone in this sad little scrap of a town.”

“We didn’t summon you for riddles!” Gaston snapped. “Name your price or leave us alone!”

The Dark One fixed his gaze on Belle. “Care to guess, dearie?”

It was said that he stole children, that a firstborn was his usual price for his services. Belle was the firstborn, the only-born, her father’s heir, her people’s pride. She was precious, she knew. He would want her. Belle swallowed the fear that came with that knowledge and spoke: “It’s me, isn’t it?”

“Correct again! Yes, I want you, dearie. In every way you can imagine and few more I’m sure you can’t.”
Everyone except Belle began shouting, and Gaston was loudest of all. “How dare you, sir? You cannot speak that way to my wife!”

“Oh are you married?” the Dark One asked Belle, in a mocking charade of friendly chat. “Well then, I must be losing my touch! I could have sworn you smelted like a maiden.” His voice lowered at that last sentence, his features contorting into a predatory grimace.

Belle blushed scarlet at the thought of this creature smelling her. She wanted to run and hide but she forced herself to stay still and face this monster. “I am a maiden,” she told him. “Gaston and I are not married yet.”

The Dark One made a wordless exclamation of pleasure, his smile bright and brittle. “Perfect! I much prefer maidens to widows!”

“Get out,” her father ordered. “You cannot speak this way to my daughter.”

“Well, if I cannot speak, I cannot deal,” the Dark One began to walk away. “But if that’s what you want…”

“Wait!” Belle cried. He couldn’t leave! She couldn’t let him go without helping them. “You can talk to me. You can say anything you want to me. Just tell me what you want.”

He turned on his heel to face her, grinning widely. “What I want isn’t the question, dearie. The question is what do you want?”

“She doesn’t want anything from you!” Sword drawn, Gaston leapt across the table to stand between Belle and the Dark One. “Leave while you are still able to walk away!”

No! He was going to ruin the deal with his ridiculous bravado! If the Dark One was threatened, what wrath would he pour out on all of them? At the very least he would leave them helpless and let the ogres save him the trouble of killing them all!

But the Dark One looked amused at the weapon pointed at his chest. He took the blade in one bare hand and bent the point up and over until the sword curled like the tail of a pig.

Gaston dropped the useless weapon but still blocked the path between Belle and the creature. He kept his back to her and spread his arms out to shield her from any attack. The man was brave, Belle had to admit that, but his kind of bravery was not going to help them. It was her responsibility, now, to do the brave thing.

“Please,” Belle tugged on his shirt to get his attention. “Please stop getting in the way. This is bigger than you now, Gaston.”

He half-turned, trying to look at her while not presenting his back to the Dark One. He looked ridiculous. He was ridiculous. The moment of connection they’d had earlier was no compensation for how little help he had been throughout the whole war. Their engagement had become a promise neither of them would keep. “But you’re my wife,” his voice was weak. “I can’t let you give yourself over to this monster.”

“I’m not your wife.” She couldn’t pretend anymore. She couldn’t allow him to think that he was going to stop this. She reached into her hair to take out the silver pin. She held it out to him. “Not anymore.”

Gaston looked down at her hand, at the hairpin that was a token of their engagement. He looked up at her, confused. “Why?”
“You couldn’t save my people,” Belle said honestly. “He can.”

Confusion turned to rage on Gaston’s face. “But he’ll eat you!” he said through clenched teeth. “He’ll defile you and kill you and gnaw on your bones. How can you choose that?”

“Gaston, I’m making this choice because no one else can. He doesn’t want anything else, just me. But you have to let me go first or he’ll kill you.”

Wordlessly, Gaston snatched the pin out of Belle’s hands and began to march out the door.

“No, no, don’t move!” the Dark One waved his hand to stop him mid-stride. “You’re going to see what happens next! Everyone is going to know the price of their lives.” He stepped closer to Belle. “Now, dearie, for propriety’s sake, tell me what you want from me.”

Belle steeled herself under the scrutiny of his attention. This was the moment she’d been waiting for. This was her chance to save her people. It was the last chance they would ever get. She had to do it right. “Can you take away the ogres?”

“Of course.” His voice was low and almost gentle. He was tempting her, offering her what her heart most desired so that he would be able to name whatever price he wanted.

“The wounded and the dying, can you heal them?” Magic could not raise the dead, no matter what story Gaston had heard, but perhaps the Dark One could bring back those on the edge of death. The moaning men in the halls, perhaps he could help them, cure their pain.

“I can restore your injured.” He said it as though it were nothing, as though such a feat was not a miracle.

“And we’ll need food for the winter as well. All of us.” That would solve their final problem. Her father could give King Midas his gold back and no one would starve. With full bellies, they could wait until springtime to rebuild their homes and farms.

“All of you?” He grinned at her. “Very well. From the lords to the beggars to the sheep in the field, this land will not go hungry. Is that everything?”

Was it everything? The creature’s manner was gracious, generous, as though he would happily provide more miracles if she requested them. But what would he ask in exchange? What would he demand for what she had already asked for? How high a price could she pay?

“There’s no more,” Belle decided. “Everything else we need we can get ourselves.”

“So!” He circled the room and every man watched him. “Three things you demand of the Dark One, and three things I will get in return. First!” He held up one finger. “If I ‘take away’ the ogres, I will take away you, dearie. And I will take you, in every way I want, whenever I want.”

He had said that before, that he wanted her. He had asked to make sure she was a maiden. And now it was in the deal that he would take her maidenhead. He would take her as a groom took his bride, and keep her away from her family forever.

He was waiting for her to answer, she realized. He was unmoving, looking at her with a question in his eyes. Wordless, Belle nodded her consent.

“Second!” he went on as though the pause had never happened. “If I heal your wounded, I will wound you, as often and as severely as it pleasures me to do so.”
Wound? Oh, but he was an evil creature. It was understandable for a man to want to bed a woman, but only a demon would take pleasure in hurting her. But the Dark One was a demon, he was evil. He was promising to torture her, to cause her pain--because it would bring him some twisted, vile pleasure.

But if her pain meant a hundred men were whole who would otherwise be maimed and crippled, then it was no choice at all. Belle nodded. She would let him hurt her.

“And third!” He had completed his circuit and stood in front of Belle again. “If I provide for all of your people, then I will deny you whatever I choose. Food or comfort, warmth or light, even control over your own body--you will have none of those. But they will.”

They would have everything she would allow the Dark One to take from her. They would live, they would have no fear, they would have peace and comfort and hope. Even if Belle didn’t.

“Deal,” Belle said firmly. This was the best deal she would ever get. He would save them. His cost was high, but she could pay it. They would be safe. They would be saved.

That was all that mattered now.

“It’s forever, dearie.” It was another silent question, a chance to reconsider. The Dark One, famed for his iron-clad deals, was offering her an escape if she wanted it.

“Death is forever too,” Belle answered. And she would rather suffer under this monster for whatever time she had left than allow her people to have no time at all.

“Belle, you can’t do this.” Her father hadn’t spoken while she had been making the deal, but now that it was done he had found his voice. “I can’t let you.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them when she spoke. “Papa, it’s already done.”

“She’s right.” The Dark One was beside her now, his hand pressing into her waist. “The deal is struck.” He moved away from her then, dancing lightly. “But now it must be sealed--in front of witnesses--with a kiss.”

“A kiss?” Uncle Armand looked at the Dark One in revulsion.

“To start with.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“It’s alright,” Belle said softly, as much to herself as to her uncle. “I can do this.”

She had never kissed a man before. Was he a man? He had a man’s shape, covered though it was in scales and rot. But the Dark One had lips and a mouth. That was all that mattered. She could kiss him.

“No, no, no, dearie!” The Dark One stopped her as she approached him with her lips pursed. “This isn’t love! This is servitude! This is fealty! You will kiss my boot.”

Belle blinked. Kissing someone’s boots was an old, old tradition, something no one really did anymore. It was said that in the days of yore, beggars would kiss the boots of rich men in return for scraps of food. When people were too poor to pay taxes, they would kiss their lord’s boot and plead with him for mercy. Those who had no power, no money, and no hope would kiss the boots of anyone who might help them--or even just stop hurting them. This act was the last recourse of helpless, desperate souls.
And it was what the Dark One wanted of her.

“On your knees, dearie.” His voice was low and full of menace.

Belle sank to the ground, her golden gown crumpled underneath her. All her finery was useless now.

His boots were black leather, polished to a shine. She could see her reflection in the pointed toes but her face was distorted and dark.

She had promised to worse than this. She had given him rights to bed her and wound her and take everything from her. Why did it now frighten her to subject herself to him? This was only the beginning, she knew. This humiliation was only the first thing he would demand of her. She had to bear it, and bear it well.

In front of her father, her uncle, and her fiance, Belle groveled on the ground and put her lips to the Dark One’s boots. The kiss took less than a moment, but it changed everything. She was his now, and they had seen it. She was his slave. Forever.

Above her, the Dark One giggled. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. “Congratulations on your little war!” he said to the men standing still as statues.

His fingernails dug into her flesh as red smoke enveloped them and the world Belle knew disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

It all gets kinkier from here, folks!
The Cell

Chapter Summary

Belle is thrown in a dungeon and thinks about what she’s done.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Belle’s last sight of her old life was the men’s shocked faces as the Dark One transported her away. Her father, her uncle, and her betrothed all seemed just about to run, to reach out for her, to pull her away from the deal she had made and the monster she had made it with. But then they were obscured by a wall of wine-red smoke and Belle couldn’t see them. She would never see them again.

The smoke lasted only for a moment, but that moment lasted for an eternity. Belle floated in the magic cloud, no ground under her feet. She heard nothing but the blood pounding in her ears. She saw only the smoke and felt only the piercing grasp of the creature next to her. He had her by the arm, his black claws digging into her pale flesh. In that strange moment of transportation, the pain of his touch was the only sensation that felt real.

She had been so sure, in her father’s study. She had so blinded by the rightness of her cause, the necessity of her deal, that she hadn’t considered the consequences. She had known what the price was, but she hadn’t understood how it would feel. She had gotten the help they needed, and had told herself that was all that mattered. And it was true. It did matter. But she hadn’t realized that she would still be afraid.

When the red smoke cleared, Belle stood with the Dark One in a room made of stone. There were doors on either end of the room, both of them flanked by gray marble columns. On either side of one door was a staircase, going up to different parts of the building. Belle realized that she was in a much grander castle than she had ever been in before. In her home, the great hall had dominated the central building as the first entry point for visitors. But here that position had been taken by this room, what fashionable people were calling a foyer.

Looking down, Belle could see her reflection in the polished stone floor. In the center of the room was a round table that held nothing more than a vase of dead flowers. Suits of armor lurked in the corners--were they ornaments or guards?

It was a cold space, but rich. At home it would be wasteful to have such a fine room sit unoccupied. As a first impression, the foyer seemed built to impress, rather than intimidate. Home had been a fortress before it was anything else, rough and utilitarian. But this place was smooth and polished and empty. Belle looked around, gawking at her first sight of a palace.

“Welcome home!” The Dark One spread his arms and smiled widely. He pointed at the door behind Belle. “That’s the way out, you won’t be using it. Follow me.” The other door opened as he approached it.

“Wait, stop,” Belle didn’t move. “Please, you have to take me back!”

He turned around to look at her. “Cold feet already, dearie?”
“No,” she said quickly. “No, I’ll pay my price, but I have to say good-bye first! My ladies think I’m still in the castle, they think I’ll be coming back to help them tend the wounded. They don’t know what happened to me!”

She was trying not to cry. It was so unfair. The men in her life knew what she had done, but the women she loved had no way of knowing. Who would ever tell them the truth? What would they imagine and fear had become of her? Her cousins, her friends--she would never see them again! She hadn’t even gotten a chance to bid them farewell.

The Dark One’s steps echoed as he slowly descended the short flight of stairs and went back to Belle. “Do you want them to know what happened to you?” He faced her, standing up straight while she hunched over and held her arms over her stomach. “Do you want to tell your women what’s going to become of your virtue? To your body? Do you want them to know the depravity I’m going to demand of you?”

If she gave into her fear now she would never stop being afraid. Belle forced herself to straighten her spine, to look this monster in the eye. “I want them to know I’m safe.”

“Oh ho ho!” His mouth formed an O shape as he pretended to laugh. “But that would be making a promise you can’t keep, dearie. You don’t know that you’re safe and telling people that would a grave falsehood.” He shook his head and tutted. “Besides, I’m sure all your peasants will soon know the means by which their lives were spared. A story like that will start spreading right away.” He chuckled at that thought, smug and self-satisfied.

Belle swallowed what was left of her tears, letting anger fill her up until no other feelings could remain.

“I should have told them myself,” she said with some dignity. “Then they would at least know what I know. My family deserves facts, not stories. I should have been given that chance.”

“Then you should have made it part of your deal, dearie!” The Dark One walked backwards to the steps. “I would have waited for a tearful good-bye, I would have found it delightful! But you didn’t ask, so I didn’t give. Let that be a lesson for you.”

Belle stayed by the table and scowled at him, saying nothing.

The Dark One stood by the door and waited for her to join him. When she didn’t, he went over to her again, and stood in front of her, his hands clasped behind his back. When he spoke, his voice was different. “Those people you love are no longer your concern, child. They are safe. They are saved. You did that. Separation from you is their part of the price.”

Belle sighed and released her anger. “I just wish--”

“There is no wishing in my home, dearie.” He cut off her words with a gesture. “All magic comes at a price and wishes only lead to trouble. Now, will you follow me?”

He strode up the steps through the doors that opened themselves. Resigned to her fate, Belle followed him through the door.

The door led into a sumptuous dining room. Belle’s head swiveled as she tried to take everything in. Indiscernible objects sat atop pillars, displayed as though they were trophies. A spinning wheel sat in a corner. There was one long wooden table and one chair at the head of it. The room was lit by a blazing fire. In front of the hearth an overstuffed armchair sat on top of a thick carpet.

Glass-fronted cabinets lined one wall, full of books and papers and more strange objects. Out of
habit, Belle craned her neck to look at the books and read the titles, but the Dark One was already leading her out another door.

“Hurry up!” he said without looking behind him and Belle rushed to catch up.

“Does anyone else live here?” she asked. “Servants or--”

“Magic serves my needs,” he said brusquely. “Magic, and now you.”

So he was alone here. And she would be alone, except for him. She would have no one to talk to, for the rest of her life.

From the dining room he led her through a maze of hallways and corridors. They took several stairways and he always went down. As they went on, the castle grew meaner and less luxurious. The plush carpets on the floor became woven rugs, then rushes, then rough stone. It was colder down here. Torches smoked on the wall but gave off no heat and only enough light to cast shadows.

“Where are you taking me?”

The Dark One turned on his heel to face her as he walked backwards. “Let’s just call it… your room.”

He spun back around and Belle was mystified by his movements. How was it possible to saunter quickly? The Dark One moved as though he were blown by a gentle breeze that always took him exactly where he wanted to go. Every step was like a dance to music only he could hear.

In the shadowy torchlight, Belle saw scales glinting on his coat. It seemed to be made of the hide of some terrible lizard, perhaps even a dragon. She could imagine how heavy such a garment would be, but the Dark One wore it lightly. He was unencumbered by his wardrobe, as he was uninhibited by locked doors and unafraid of cold steel.

He seemed ephemeral, Belle thought as she walked behind him. It was as though he wasn’t real. Even as she looked at him, she couldn’t swear that he was any more substantial than a shadow. His very presence might be an illusion, a trick of the light--or, more aptly, a trick of the darkness.

She had focused her attention on the Dark One so she wouldn’t have to think about where he was leading her. They walked along a corridor lined with heavy wooden doors. Every door had a grate at the top, a peephole for an observer to look in at the occupant. There were sconces here, but no torches to burn in them. This was the darkest, dampest, most miserable part of the castle. She knew where she was even before the Dark One stopped at the last door in the hallway.

“My room?” Belle’s stomach dropped as he opened the door with a wave of his hand.

“Doesn’t that sound nicer than calling it a dungeon?” His rotten smile mocked her discomfort.

She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her dismay. Stone-faced, and of her own volition, Belle crossed the threshold into a prison cell and let the Dark One slam the door behind her.

“Rest up, dearie!” He called in through the grate. ”We’ll be consummating our deal very soon!” He giggled and Belle could hear the sound echoing through the halls.

She kept her eyes closed until the laughter faded away. Only then did Belle move and begin to look around at her new home. Her room. Her cell.

All four walls were made of stone, but not the polished marble of the foyer. The stone was rough and
actually reminded her of her castle. But at home they covered the walls with brightly-colored
tapestries, to keep the rooms warm and cheery. Their walls were only bare in places where no one
was expected to be—or places where the fact of being there was a punishment.

Glassless, narrow windows lined one wall just below the ceiling. Iron bars let in the fading light and
the evening chill. There was no fireplace in this cell. If it was cold in autumn, it would be icy in the
winter.

There was a bucket in one corner—empty for now. There was a wooden bench built into the wall,
long enough for someone as small as her to lie down on. She would probably be expected to sleep
there, when she wasn’t warming the Dark One’s bed, serving his needs.

Belle had that thought, and put it away. It was too terrible to dwell on just now. She kept her mind
on the reality in front of her.

The door behind her was so old the wood had aged into something more like iron. Belle was too
short to properly look through the grate. She jumped up and down to try to catch a glimpse of the
outside, but the corridor was dark and empty. There was nothing to see.

Outside, the sun was setting. She stood on the bench to peer out the windows, but the only view she
had through the bars was an expanse of mud. An outer wall stood some distance away. So even if a
prisoner escaped from the cell, they wouldn’t be out of the castle. There was no getting out of this
place.

Belle turned from the window and sank onto the bench. She made herself comfortable in her new
home under the ground. Her hand went up to her neck, feeling for the pendant of her mother’s
necklace. How lucky it was that she had been wearing it when the Dark One took her away. She had
nothing from home except the clothes on her back. If she had nothing else to remember her old life
by, at least she had the necklace.

She ran the bit of unicorn horn back and forth through the gold chain, just like her mother used to
when she was nervous. Belle didn’t remember ever learning to copy her mother in that. She hadn’t
noticed she was doing it at the funeral until Ermentrude had told her, gently, to stop it.

Her mother’s funeral had been one of so many that summer. It was a rushed and slapdash affair,
scheduled between a war parade and the meeting with Gaston’s father finalizing her engagement.
Under any other circumstances Lady Collette’s funeral should have been a full week of public
mourning. King Midas should have come—or at least sent an envoy to pay the royal respects. Her
death should have been all anyone thought of for months. It was the end of the world, after all—they
should have acted like it.

Would losing her mean as much, Belle wondered. What would her father tell everyone had
happened to her? Would her people count her as the last casualty of the Ogre War? Would they
honor her memory? Or would they never speak of her again? Did they already know that she was as
good as dead?

Belle shook her head against those awful thoughts. She wasn’t going to die here. What the Dark One
had planned for her was a fate worse than death. Actually killing her was probably superfluous.

That thought made it hard to breathe. Her formal corset was constricting under the best of
circumstances, and now her fear and panic choked at her until she was sure she would faint. She
leaned back against the stone wall and tried to calm herself, tried to sort through her terror. What,
exactly, was she afraid of?
She had been living with fear for months. That morning she had awoken certain that she wouldn’t live to go to bed. She had been so sure that the ogres would attack the castle and eat her. She had been afraid of that, but also determined to do something about it. So she had called the Dark One.

He wasn’t going to kill her. That was a better deal than she would have gotten from the orges. Her friends and family were alive. Her home was safe. The wounded were healed. They would have food enough to survive the winter. Everything she had been afraid of when she woke up was no longer a possibility.

So now all Belle had to fear was paying the price for her miracles.

He would take her. He would hurt her. He would deprive her. Those were the terms they had agreed to. How long would it be until it started, until he came back here to consummate the deal?

What a deliberate, spiteful word to use, consummate. It was the same word people used to talk about marriage, about wedding nights. He was mocking it, mocking her, and the future she had always thought would be hers. He was mocking her for being a maiden, a virgin, for saving her virtue for whatever man she would end up marrying. What a waste! If she had let some boy tumble her in a hayloft would she now be spared the Dark One’s attentions? If she were not a virgin would she be below his notice?

If she were not a virgin would he have helped them at all?

That was what it all came back to. She had something that the Dark One wanted, and he had paid her to get it. If she hadn’t been what he had wanted, her people would be suffering far more than she was now. She would have to do this, have to give him what he wanted. She would have to let him take her and hurt her and deny her any comfort. She would have to serve his needs, and serve him well.

She stood up off the bench and felt the dampness from the wall clinging to her dress. It was ruined now, she thought. Her wedding dress, her armor, this precious, ludicrous gown that had brought her so much joy only a few hours ago when she had worn it for Alix--it was ruined now.

Alix. Belle didn’t want to think about them now. Jeanne. Not now while she was waiting to be defiled. Mathilde. They had been with her since she was a girl. Ermentrude. She would never see them again. Little Claude. They would never understand what had happened to her. Madame Nanette. Would they ever believe that she had made a deal to sell her body to the most evil creature in the world?

“I did it for you,” she whispered out loud. “If only I could tell you that.”

Save them, her mother had said. Help us, the wounded had moaned. And then there was the Dark One, offering, Give me. So she did. She gave, and she helped, and she saved them all. The facts were so simple, but facing the reality was hard.

They were safe, she reminded herself. They would live, no matter what happened to her. They would mourn her as they had mourned all the other dead--as they would mourn Andre and Uncle Pierre and a hundred others--and then they would move on.

They would have futures. Madame Nanette would help the village women until she died peacefully in her sleep. Mathilde and Jeanne would marry whatever eligible men could be found and they would start on having their own families. Ermentrude would attach herself to whichever one of their households needed the most supervision, bringing up the children and teaching them how to be ladies and gentlemen. Little Claude would grow up and perhaps she wouldn’t even remember the
attacks. She was young enough, this whole thing could one day become nothing more than a childish nightmare. She might even forget about Belle.

What about the village women? What would their futures be? Would Sir Maurice think to arrange for a home for the widows and orphans, a force to help them rebuild their lives? Even if the wounded men were all healed, so many fathers and husbands had already died. So many houses and farms had been destroyed. If Belle were the head of the castle, she could give positions to as many women as possible, or have them learn trades so they could support themselves. There could be female brewsters and leatherworkers, why not? Belle herself could teach a class on reading and ledgering so some could become scribes or money-counters.

Would Alix like to learn how to read? She was clever and curious, but those were not always easy traits for a girl to have. What would happen to her? Her father was gone. What would her mother do to support them? If Belle were there, she could hire the woman to work in the castle, and take Alix as her serving maid--easy, indoor work that paid well and included room and board for both of them.

Even if she were still forced to marry Gaston, Belle could have taken Alix with her to the Duke’s castle. She could sneak minutes away with the girl, talk to her and treat her kindly. In a perfect world, Belle could teach her to read and they could talk about their favorite stories.

If I grow up, I want to be like you. Alix would grow up. But would she still want to be like Belle now? What would Lady Collette think of what had become of her daughter? What would any of them think of the deal she had made?

It was too much. Belle laid on the bench--her bed--and curled into as much of a ball as she could. She had saved her loved ones, but she had lost them. As the Dark One had said, that was part of the price. She could do nothing more for them. They were alive. They would all have futures. But she wouldn’t be a part of those futures.

And surely once the Dark One had taken the rest of his price, they wouldn’t want her to be a part of their lives anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter begins the smut!
Belle didn’t realize she had been asleep until she woke up. When she first opened her eyes she saw nothing but darkness. Home was never this dark--they always left the fire burning or the windows open in her bedchamber. Little Claude was always afraid of monsters in the dark.

What monsters were around Belle now? She shook as she tried fruitlessly to look around. Was anyone else in the cell with her? Was he there, close enough to pounce on her without any warning? Was the cell even real anymore or had she been transported to void of blackness?

Jolting up, Belle braced her hands against the wooden bench. It was solid beneath her palms, she could feel the grain. She had been sleeping on that hard surface, which was why her body ached. The bench was real. She couldn’t see it, but she could trust it.

Gingerly, she let her feet touch the ground. By rights a prison should have rats, but Belle heard no skittering and felt nothing furry around her toes. There was only stone under her slippers. Still sitting, she placed her feet solidly on the floor. That was real too.

Moonlight filtered in through the narrow windows. Her eyes had adjusted enough to see it now. It was a weak, fading light--it must be late enough that the full moon was setting before dawn. But the silvery light was enough to help Belle make out the dimensions of her cell. The wall in front of her was lightest, she could see the shadowed outlines of the bars at the window. The darkest corner was by the door.

Would he actually use the door? Or would he just appear as he had in her father’s study?

The Dark One was going to ravish her tonight, Belle knew it with a sick certainty. These were her last moments as a virgin. He was going to demand her body, make her pay the price for his help.

“Glad to see you’re awake!” His voice was so loud and so unsettlingly cheerful it made Belle jump. She didn’t want to be afraid, but dread had seeped into her bones along with the cold night air.

“See me?” She forced her mind to focus on his words, forced herself to think about anything besides her nerves. “You can see me? In the dark?”

“It’s called magic, dearie.” He sounded amused. “You’ll have to get used to it.”

How was she could she get used to a thing like the Dark One? If he could see in the dark, what else could he do? This creature obeyed no laws of nature and had no concern for anyone. And she was entirely at his mercy.

“Are you ready to begin, girl?”
How could anyone be ready for this? How would she even know if she was? Would it matter if she told him she wasn’t? Why had he even bothered asking?

“How does this start?” Belle heard the fear in her own voice. She pressed her nails into her palms and let the pain steady her. She couldn’t be afraid. Not now.

“It starts,” his voice moved toward her and he pressed a heavy object into her lap, “with you drinking this.

Belle touched the rounded object, and felt that she was holding a goblet. The outside was warm to the touch and a strong scent of herbs wafted up from it. “What is it?”

“Well, it’s mostly poison, but it will save your life.”

She flinched and almost dropped the goblet on the ground. “Poison!”

“But very healthsome!” He giggled.

Belle rubbed her fingers against the smooth cup. A healthy poison? A deadly draught that would save her life? “What kind of riddle is this?”

“My kind,” he said. “But let me answer it: This is a potion that will keep your body from conceiving a child.”

Belle blinked. Was even that possible for him? Was there nothing the Dark One could not do? She hadn’t thought about children when she had given him permission to take her. But of course if they were to act as a man and woman, it made sense that children would follow. It repulsed her to think that her body would even try to make a child with this creature. Perhaps it disgusted him too, and that was why he was giving her a poison that would only kill his spawn.

“Will this really save my life?”

“Birthing is a nasty business, dearie. Birthing a demon even more so. I advise you drink.”

‘Advise’ but not ‘order.’ He had placed the goblet in her hands but had not commanded her to drink it. “Do I have a choice?”

“Tonight, everything you do is of your own free will. Tomorrow, of course, will be different.” He giggled again and Belle felt her belly coiling at the sound.

She looked down at the goblet she couldn’t see. It would be a sad and lonely future for her to never have any children. But how terrible, how dangerous would it be to quicken with the offspring of this monster?

It was a choice that was no choice. Belle put the goblet to her lips and drank. The potion was warm and the warmth filled her, from down in her belly to the top of her head and out through her fingers and toes. The taste was creamy and medicinal, sour-sweet like unripe fruit. Belle’s mouth tingled from the magic and she swallowed a few times to remove the sensation.

When the cup was empty, she held it in front of her and felt him take it away. There was a brief flash of blue light as he made the goblet disappear.

“Good girl,” the Dark One said softly. “I’ll make that for you every month. When the moon is full, your womb will be empty. Do you understand?”
In the darkness, Belle nodded.

“Now we must talk.”

He sat down on the bench with her, but far enough away that they only touched when his knee bumped against hers. She could see him faintly, a shadow in the darkness. The outline of his shoulders made it look like he was facing her. But he made no move to touch her. How strange it was to find this creature deferential, when Belle had expected only violation.

He cleared his throat but didn’t speak. Belle didn’t know how to respond. If only she could see him more clearly! So much of the Dark One’s manner came from his expressions and his bodily movements. In this darkness, Belle had only his words to guide her and when he was silent she was completely lost.

After a moment, she screwed up her courage and asked. “What did you want to talk about?”

When his voice came, it was so soft and calm it might have been coming from a different person: “I have done,” he said, “what you asked me to do. The ogres are gone from your land. The wounded soldiers have been healed, the dying saved from the brink of death. Across your kingdom, the barns are filled with grain, the storerooms overflowing with salt meat and harvest fruits.”

In the cold cell, Belle’s heart grew warm. “Really?” She found herself smiling. “You did it? Already?”

“Did you doubt? Have you ever heard that Rumpelstiltskin doesn’t keep his end of a deal?”

“No, I–”

“Never mind,” he sighed. “I know how it is. A beast has no honor.”

“But you did it!” Relief poured over her like the summer sun. “You saved them!”

Overcome with happiness, Belle reached out and tried to grasp his hands. She wanted to thank him, to invite him to share in her happiness.

But her hands fell upon nothing. She heard the Dark One slide across the bench, as far away from her as possible. Dimly, she could the shape of him get smaller, shrinking back from her touch.

“We-ell,” he stretched out the word, and she could hear him sitting up straighter. He spoke as though she had never reached out to him. “Perhaps I did. Or perhaps it was you.”

Confusion overshadowed Belle’s joy. Why didn’t he want her to touch him? Wasn’t that the whole point of her being here? “What difference does it make who gets the credit?”

“It’s not about credit, my dear, it’s about what kind of story people will tell. It could be that you sacrificed your virtue and your dignity and your body in order to save your people. Or it could be that I was testing you. It could be that I might take a smaller price for my service.”

A smaller price? Did that mean that he would let her go? Without using her or harming her at all?

“But… I made vows to you. We agreed on what the price would be.”

“Vows are broken every day, child. Just ask that boy with the sword.”

She had broken her engagement to Gaston, but surely a contract with the Dark One was more binding. “But if I back out, if I refuse to pay your price–what will happen to my people?”
“That’s where the story changes. Instead of you sacrificing yourself to save them, I did it out of the goodness of my twisted, blackened heart.”

Belle shook her head. “But that’s not a story anyone would tell. No one breaks deals with you.”

“Our deal will be different, even if you decide to keep it. But you know what you swore to me, child. Do you truly want that life—this life? Darkness and dungeons and pain?”

When had it ever mattered what she wanted? She had been all but sold to Gaston in exchange for his help against the ogres and when he had proved incapable, she had made a deal with a high power. All she had wanted was for her people to live. Her future belonged to the man who had made that happen.

A darker thought crept into her mind: She was ruined already. She had broken her engagement, she had pledged herself to the Dark One. She had kissed his boots. Her own father had witnessed that debasement. The Dark One had taken her away. No one would believe her if she said he had done no more.

What future would she have if she went back? What man would marry her? What type of woman would she have to count as her equal now? What respectable person would even look her in the eye? At best she would be shut away and grow old as an unmarriageable spinster. At worst she would be cast out to the streets, a fallen woman.

If she stayed… Truth be told, she couldn’t imagine what would happen if she stayed, and that alone was a fascinating prospect. Would a lifetime of being taken and hurt and misused by the Dark One be any worse than the shame of going back?

“We made an agreement,” Belle said. “It would be wrong to give you any less.”

In the darkness next to her, Belle heard a faint exhalation of breath, almost a chuckle, but more surprised. “Very well,” he stood up. “Don’t say I never gave you a chance.”

For just a moment, they stayed like that. She sat on the bench and looked up at his outline. He stood before her and she hoped he was looking at her. This was it, Belle thought. This was the moment she could never turn back from. He had given her a chance to run, and she had chosen to stay.

When he spoke again, his voice was more lordly. “You can only do something for the first time once,” he declared. “It is my intention to do this as well as I can.”

Belle stood up to face him as best she could. “That is my intention as well,” she said.

“Really?”

“I can’t go back to my old life,” she said. “If this is to be my future, then I want to be good at it. I want to please you, Dark One.”

In the darkness, she could feel him step closer to her, close enough that she could hear his breathing. “It would please me,” he said huskily, “to hear you say my name.”

It was bad luck to say the name of the Dark One. Everyone knew that. If you said his name, he would see you, and come to you, and make a deal that you’d end up regretting. But that had already happened to Belle. Their deal was made. He was here, now, in front of her, asking her to say his name. What else did she have to be afraid of?

“Rumpelstiltskin,” she said softly.
The sound that came from the Dark One was something like a sigh. “Thank you,” he whispered. Then he cleared his throat and became imperious again. “I will demand no honorifics from you. I am your owner, but not your master. If you want something from me, if you wish to beg for mercy or ask for help, then you will call me by my name and I will hear you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Belle said.

“No, not even that. What I am does not require respect, only fear. Just say ‘Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.’”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Good,” his breathing was heavy and she felt the heat of his hands on her face. “Good girl. Now let me look at you.”

His fingertips were smooth and warm. His fingernails did not press into her skin as they had when he had grabbed her to take her away from her family. Now he held her gently by the chin, tilting her face this way and that, seeing her in the darkness. His touch was light, but certain. He was controlling her movements, even if he wasn’t using force. It was the first time he had touched her since the war room.

Belle allowed herself to be scrutinized. It did irk her that she couldn’t see his face while he was examining hers. She wanted to know what he thought of her. Was her appearance pleasing to him? People always complimented her on her prettiness, but what did the Dark One find attractive? What did he want her to be?

“Beautiful,” he said as his touch relaxed. He kept his hands on her jaw and neck. “You are well-named, Belle.”

He spoke the word deliberately, drawing attention to the fact that this was the first time he had ever used it. Belle felt a shiver go up her spine to hear her name in his mouth.

“It’s funny,” she said. “Until this moment, I didn’t think you knew my name.”

“I make it a point to know a little about the people I make deals with.”

That was thought that made Belle’s heart pound. “What else do you know about me?”

“I know that you are brave,” he said softly. Still touching her throat, he stepped to stand behind her. He pushed her hair over her shoulder and ran his hands down the back of her gown. “I know that you were desperate.” He unlaced the gown and set to work on her corset. “And I have a sneaking suspicion that you might be odd.”

“Odd?” The word came out as a gasp as he pushed the dress down her body. “Where would you get an idea like that?”

“Let us say that like calls to like.” He took off her corset and left her standing in her shift and petticoats. “And I have reason to believe that you will not find my tastes as revolting as other young maidens might.”

He wasn’t wrong. Belle couldn’t imagine Jeanne or Mathilde being able to have a conversation with the Dark One. Trapped in a cell like this, any sensible girl would have succumbed to weeping. Any sensible girl would have backed out of this deal when he had given her a chance.

But Belle was here. She had chosen to be here. Odd was a kinder word than some would use to describe a woman in her position.
“You can undress yourself if you like. I’ll watch.”

Her gown was in a crumpled pile around her ankles. She picked it up and shook out the fabric before folding neatly and setting it on the floor. She took off her final layers and folded them as well. Later, she would surely find out what he wanted her to wear. For now Belle was naked, standing before the Dark One. In that moment, and to her own surprise, she was not afraid.

“Oh yes,” he whispered. “Very beautiful.”

She shivered, but it was only the cold. He had been standing back, admiring her, but now she felt him take her hand. He lifted her arm until it was extended and Belle felt a burst of heat on the back of her hand.

It was his breath, she realized when she felt it again. He was kissing her hand as though he were a gentleman meeting a lady at a grand ball. It was such an incongruous gesture that Belle almost laughed. She was standing naked in a dungeon and the Dark One--the most feared creature in all the realms--was kissing her hand!

He turned her wrist gently and put his lips to her palms, then each of her fingers. He took her other hand and switched back and forth, covering her with delicate kisses.

It was so soft, Belle thought, so tender. This was nothing like what she had thought to expect--not from a husband and certainly not from a creature like the Dark One!

He kissed her wrists at the pulse points and Belle felt the heat of it travel through her veins up her arms and into her heart.

“Oh,” she said softly.

“Do you like that, Belle?” his voice was gentle, sincere.

“I think I do.” It was such a strange sensation. She could hardly say whether she truly liked it. But she certainly didn’t dislike it.

“Good,” he said. With the same steady slowness, the Dark One placed kisses up her arm, not stopping until his mouth had traveled past her shoulder and to the nape of her neck. He kept one hand on Belle’s shoulder, but with the other he crooked his finger around the chain of her necklace.

“Tell me about this.”

“It was my mother’s,” Belle’s eyes closed in the darkness, in the warmth of his touch. “It’s been in the family for generations. The pendant is unicorn horn.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat. “Unicorns are drawn to virgins,” he closed his hand around the necklace and broke the chain. “This will do you no good anymore.”

Belle’s eyes snapped open and her hands flew to her throat, but the necklace was gone. Gone! He had snatched it off her neck just like the ogres had snatched away Mama. The clasp had broken just like when Ermentrude had handed it to her on that terrible morning in the mist. Everything was happening again. Panic flooded her senses. Everything was ending all over again!

“Give it back!” she pleaded. “It’s mine! It’s my mother’s! Please!”

“No,” he said with a flash of blue light. “This necklace is mine now. As your body is mine.”
“You have to give it back!” Belle choked out a sob. “It’s all I have left!”

“Yes, that’s why I want it, dearie.” His voice was malicious and gleeful. He was enjoying her pain.

“No!” She lunged in the darkness, grabbing at his body, feeling for his hands. But they were empty. He had already made her necklace disappear. “Where is it?”

“It’s safe, child. I took the thing to keep it, not to throw it away.”

“Give it back,” she sobbed. She hadn’t cried until now, not until this devastating betrayal. “What good is it to you?”

“It’s precious,” he answered. “Precious to you, just as you were precious to your people. This is what I do, dearie. I take.”

It was true and she knew it was true. The Dark One stole as much as he gave. But why did he steal what she needed to keep? How could he be so cruel? So unfeeling? And she was giving her body to him! How else would show his cruelty? In what other ways would he prove himself a monster?

The fear and the sorrow that Belle had pressed down over and over welled up from her chest and came out in sobs. She cried so hard she couldn’t breathe, her passions swift and violent as a thunderstorm. She sobbed until she choked, until she was bent over. Until she could make no more noise at all.

“No, none of that!” His hands were on her shoulders, lifting her up. His voice was urgent, but gentle. She had no strength, so she let him hold her upright. “You need to breathe to stay alive. Take a deep breath for me, Belle. Just one.”

She didn’t want to obey him, didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. But he was right. Belle filled her lungs and then let the shaking breath come out.

“Good girl. Now another one.”

How stupid that she needed him to tell her to breathe. But his instruction steadied her. It was easier to control herself if she let him control her.

“Good, good. A few more.”

He made her breathe until she could do it without crying, without shaking. He made her breathe until she was calm again.

“That’s better.” It sounded like he was smiling. “You’re going to have to learn to live with fear, my girl. Fear, sorrow, an indecent amount of guilt and shame—they’re not going to stop. You just have to breathe through them.”

Now Belle was calm enough to be angry. “I wouldn’t be upset if you hadn’t stolen from me.”

“Yes, but that’s not going to stop either. I’m going to keep upsetting you, and taking from you, and turning your senses upside down and inside out. I will demand so much of you, Belle. But I truly believe you can cope. I truly believe that you can find pleasure in the life I’m condemning you to.”

Belle sighed, taking a deep breath without having to be ordered. He was right. She had agreed to be his possession. How could she resent him for doing what he had said he would do?

“It still hurts,” she wiped at her eyes.
“Yes. The pain is as much a part of our deal as the pleasure. It won’t stop, but you can endure it. You’re strong enough.”

How could he know that? How could he be so sure? Especially when Belle herself had no reason to think that she could bear the trials that would be coming to her?

But then he had his hands on her again and all her questions became meaningless. Her mind stilled as he touched her body. He kissed along her neck, the place where her necklace had been. He kept going as though nothing had delayed his previous journey. And she let him, softening to his ministrations.

She felt his breath hot in her hair and on her ears. He inhaled deeply—he was smelling her—and Belle’s body tensed. He kissed around her face, but did not trouble himself with her mouth, going from her jaw back to her throat. The Dark One moved from her neck to her chest. He put his hands on her waist and kissed the wide expanse between her collarbone and her breasts. His grip tightened as he bent over her, lowered his head to press his lips to her soft flesh.

His breath on her breast was like a fire, billowing outward and consuming her. He sucked her nipple into his mouth and flicked at it with his tongue. Belle’s knees buckled at the overwhelming sensation. She opened her mouth and then shut it before any sound could escape.

He released her with a pop and chuckled. “Don’t be afraid to make noises, my dear. There’s no one to hear you but me.”

So when he gave her other breast the same treatment, Belle closed her eyes and moaned, albeit tentatively. How was he doing this? What magic was he working on her body to make it behave so absurdly? Did it pleasure him to hear her make these noises?

After the heat of his mouth, the cool air of the dungeon felt icy on her exposed skin. Belle felt her nipples harden, felt their sensitivity to every movement, to every breath of wind. She felt her body get tighter, as though she were a bowstring, pulled back and ready to let an arrow fly.

When he kissed her belly, she bunched into herself and jerked away from him. But for all the strangeness of that feeling, she didn’t want him to stop. It seemed he knew her dilemma. He held her steady by the hips and forced her to be still while his mouth traveled against the soft curves of her abdomen. His fingernails dug into her flesh as he covered her with kisses.

“Oh,” Belle sighed. That felt good.

He stopped when his mouth reached her curls. Belle felt the heat of his breath touch her secret places. He was bent at the waist in front of her. She reached out her hand and felt the hard, scaly leather of the back of his coat.

He stood up quickly. “Go lie down and spread your legs wide for me.”

“Yes, Dark One.” Belle began to obey but he took her by the arm to stop her.

“What did you say?” He wasn’t angry, but it was clear that she had done wrong and needed to correct herself.

“I mean—yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He let her go. “Good girl.”
The wooden bench was still hard and uncomfortable, but there was no other surface she would lie on. Belle lay on her back and opened her legs.

“Wider,” he instructed. “You’re a whore now, dearie, you’ll have to act like it.”

Bristling at the insult, Belle began to push herself off the bench, ready to give him a piece of her mind. But then she stopped. He wasn’t wrong, was he? She had asked for his help and he had demanded her body. She was giving herself over to him now, but only for a price. She was a whore. And she would keep being a whore until he didn’t want her anymore.

She lay down again, with one leg bent at the knee and the other planted on the damp floor.

“That’s better,” he said. He sat on the bench, perpendicular to how she lay. She could feel his back against the leg she had propped up against the wall.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on top of me?”

“All in good time.” He put one hand on her inner thigh, squeezing the soft skin possessively. With the other hand, he ran his fingers through the curly hair between her legs.

As when he had touched her belly, she fought the instinct to pull away from his touch. It was not unpleasant, but it was so strange, so new. She couldn’t help her reaction.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I do want to please you.”

“You do,” his voice was low. “You are.” His hand moved from her thigh to her stomach. She felt his fingers splayed out against her, holding her down, keeping her still.

“What should I do?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “You don’t even have to think if you don’t want to. Just let me work in you.”

Belle closed her eyes and lay back. When had she ever done nothing? Even as a child she’d had lessons and sewing and reading to do. A woman’s work was never done. She had to manage a household, had to learn everything she’d need to know for the future. Even when there was no task for her hands, Belle had always had to think, to plan, to make lists of things she needed to do at the next available opportunity.

But now there was nothing. Nothing for her to do, no one for her to worry about, nowhere she needed to be. She was here, and it was now, and she was with the Dark One. Her only duty was to give him what he wanted. And all he wanted her to do was nothing.

His fingers explored her secret places with aching slowness. Feather-light touches built up an uncomfortable tension deep within her. When he traced one finger on the very outside of her womanhood, Belle felt herself wanting to cry. She wanted to beg him, but beg him for what? Did she want him to stop or never stop?

Under his touch, her back arched and she finally recognized the feeling rising up from between her legs. He was touching her in the way she touched herself sometimes. It was pleasure he was giving her--a slow, agonizing pleasure, so different from her own hurried fumblings.

The hand that had been resting on her stomach crept up her body to hold her breast. His thumb brushed against her nipple and Belle gasped at the sensation.
“Remember what I said about making noises, girl.”

“You said I could!”

“And I meant it!” He worked his fingers into her womanhood, opening the gates that guarded her most intimate place. As soon as he touched her, he swore loudly.

“What is it?” Belle pushed herself up onto her elbows. Was something wrong?

“You’re wet!”

“Oh.” Was that all? “Yes, it gets like that down there. I hope it doesn’t bother--”

He cut her off with his first kiss on her mouth. It was a wet kiss, slobbery and demanding. His mouth covered hers and he sucked at her tongue and his arm wrapped around her and his fingers played busily between her legs. He took her wetness and spread it around her folds of flesh and every touch made Belle whimper and moan. He broke the kiss and rubbed her over and over, muttering obscenities into her ear. He said please more than any other word.

Belle felt her pleasure rise as the Dark One used his fingers on her. His thumb found a hard spot at the crest of her womanhood and the touch burst through her like a bolt of lightning. She yelped. Her pleasure came up from between her legs, filling her chest and eventually pouring out of her mouth in an unbroken cry. She shook and jerked and Rumpelstiltskin held her and touched her and praised her until she couldn’t bear the ecstasy for another moment.

Belle went limp, her body shuddering with every heartbeat. The Dark One held her to his chest. He was still wearing his clothes. Hard leather and metal were cold against her heated skin. She rested against him until he set her back down onto the bench.

“What you just did,” he told her, “is called an orgasm. You’re going to have one every day for as long as you serve me.”

“Every day?” Belle whispered. That pleasure had been intense enough to satisfy her cravings for a month if not longer. How could she exert herself to that extent every day for the rest of her life?

“You’ll get used to it, my sweet. You’ll get used to a lot of things.”

“If you say so,” she sighed, resting her head on the wood. It was lighter in the cell. Dawn was breaking. It seemed they had been doing this for some time. She closed her eyes, exhausted.

“We’re not done yet, my dear.” He was moving, positioning himself to lie on top of her. He was still wearing his coat. “It’s my turn.”

His fingers inside her had been bony, but small and dextrous. When he pushed his manhood between her legs it was a blunt and awkward hardness.

Belle winced and the Dark One fumbled at where their bodies joined.

“Sorry,” he said as he adjusted himself. “It’s so easy to hurt a woman while doing this. And I never want to hurt you accidentally.”

It was less painful now. He eased into her slowly, breathing deeply as he moved.

“Not on accident,” Belle repeated. “Only deliberately?”

“That’s what you agreed to, dearie.” In the gloom of dawn, Belle could finally see his face. His eyes
were closed, as though he was trying to savor her. “But not now, not yet. We have plenty of time to find all the ways to hurt you.”

“Will you hurt me every day?” she asked. “Will I get used to that, just like the orgasms?”

“That is,” he thrust himself deeply inside her, “the plan.”

“Why?” If she kept talking she wouldn’t have to think about her body, what he was doing to her, how strange and uncomfortable and satisfying it was.

Her question made him open his eyes. He looked down at her and his mouth crooked into a grin. “Because it’s fun, dearie. You’ll see.” He picked up his pace. “I’ll make you enjoy it, my girl.” He whispered as he thrust, faster and faster. “I’ll give you pleasure to match your pain. I’ll make you scream with agony and delight until you don’t know which is which. I’ll debase you and debauch you and make you weep with joy. I’ll hurt you so well you’ll beg me for it and then I’ll fuck you over and over, my beautiful whore.”

His words became grunts, incomprehensible mutterings. He pushed again and again below her waist, banging his body into hers. He closed his eyes again, swearing and shouting, louder and faster. If Belle’s pleasure was one long cry, his seemed to be a thousand broken ones.

With a final shout, he collapsed on to Belle. She felt a new heat bursting between her legs, a liquid pleasure. Only slowly did she realize that the feeling was coming from the Dark One’s body, from his manhood.

So that is how it happens, Belle thought. So that is a marriage bed. So that was a maidenhead lost.

She was so consumed by her own thoughts and discoveries, that she barely registered how completely the Dark One was lying on her. He seemed as exhausted as she was. He lay on her bosom, like a love-struck boy in some romantic painting, and Belle had the vague thought to wrap her arms around him, to stroke his back and play with his sweat-dampened hair. That was what a lover would do. She could whisper sweet words into his ears. She could treat him tenderly.

But then he opened his eyes and pushed himself off her. He scrambled to his feet and stood in front of her. It was the first time he had ever seemed ill-at-ease. In the morning light, she could see that he was still fully dressed, his breeches laced tightly.

He saw her looking at him and straightened up, cleared his throat. “I didn’t think this would take so long,” he said, almost apologetic. “There’s only one more thing we need to do.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to bind you to me. Properly.”

Before she could ask what he meant, he conjured up a spindle and a handful of straw.

Belle’s mouth opened. Was this it? Were the stories true? Was she really going to see the Dark One spin straw into gold?

He held the stalks of straw in one hand and with the other he reached between Belle’s legs. He didn’t look at her as he pulled up a glob of her wetness, holding the glistening fluid on two fingers.

The touch made Belle jerk again and she felt her insides pulsing. It was all so strange and hot and good. She had never felt like this after satisfying herself. How powerful was his magic, to render her so insensible?
The fluid on his hands glinted darkly in the gray light. Was it blood? Had he made her bleed? No, Belle blinked slowly into the realization, the liquid was dark but not red. It was her wetness, but combined with his seed. Her pleasure mixed with his completion.

He spread the dark fluid over the straw, coating every stalk with the obscene mixture. Then he began to spin.

The spindle bobbed merrily as it spun and the straw glowed dimly as it turned into gold. Belle had never spun yarn, but even she could see what a marvel this was. The stiff stalks bent and became pliable as thread, their color changing only slightly as their value increased.

When the straw was gone and the spindle was wound with gold, the Dark One took the thread from the staff and tossed the spindle away. The spindle never hit the floor but vanished in a puff of blue smoke.

Silently, he wove the thread between his hands, making a sort of cat’s cradle. Belle sat up to watch. The thread had looped around and around his fingers, almost immobilizing him. He rocked on his heels as he worked, the motion entrancing him as much as it did her.

“Give me your hands,” he said, and Belle offered them up to him. With a quick, skillful motion, he flipped the thread from his fingers to her wrists, binding her hands together. He held her wrists together for a moment, then broke them apart with a glow of magic.

The threads had become bands of solid gold, completely encircling both of her wrists.

“Oh,” Belle breathed as she looked at them. The bracelets were as wide as the first two knuckles of her smallest finger. She could see her reflection in the shining metal and felt the weight of pure gold. “I’ve never worn jewelry this grand,” she told him. “Thank you.”

The Dark One looked at her quizzically. “These aren’t a gift, dearie.” He shook his head at her. “These are your shackles!”

“What?”

“Lean back against the wall,” he ordered, and Belle watched, amazed, as her wrists move of their own accord to obey him. Both her hands were at the level of her head, forcing her to sit up on the bench. The cuffs locked into the stone behind her and no matter how Belle struggled she could not break away. Her amazement quickly shifted into horror.

The Dark One headed for the door.

“Wait!” she cried out. “Rumpelstiltskin, wait!”

He turned, cocking his head to look at her.

“You can’t just leave me here like this!”

“Of course I can!” He danced over to her. “I can do anything I want to you! But, since you were so clever about using my name to get my attention, I’ll soften the blow.”

He summoned a square pillow and wedged it between the back of her head and the cold stone.

Belle looked up at him, helpless. She could think of no other words that might move him to have mercy on her.
He looked down at her, exposing his black and broken teeth in a look that was both a sneer and a grin. “But don’t worry, dearie. I’ll be back!”

Chapter End Notes

Ladies, gentlemen and others... the Golden Cuffs have entered the story!
The Dark One’s laughter echoed down the halls of the dungeon. Gradually, the sound faded and Belle understood that he was not going to return.

With a shaking breath, Belle calmed her nerves by thinking only of the facts: He had locked her in the cell with her arms bound to the wall. He had imprisoned her, while she was naked and still filthy from coupling. He had taken her virginity, put magical shackles on her wrists, and left.

And he had given her a pillow. That was a fact too. She leaned back on the sky-blue silk, resting her head against the soft feathers. Even in his cruelty, he had provided that comfort. He had cushioned her, literally, from the worst of what he could do. But only because she had called his name.

She didn’t dare call the Dark One again. No good would come of it. His words still rang in her ears, *I can do anything I want to you!* He wanted to leave her in this state. It pleased him to have her like this. Calling for him wouldn’t change that—at least not for the better.

He hadn’t hurt her yet, though he had promised to. If she called the Dark One it might anger him and he might hurt her. For now it was better to be alone. Better to be safe, even if she was uncomfortable.

Turning her head, Belle looked at the cuffs on her wrists. They were identical golden bands, smooth and polished. She could see her face reflected in the gold, see her expression of confusion and hopelessness. There was no clasp on these cuffs, no latch by which they were fastened. They fit tightly around her wrists, there was no way to pull them off over her hands. The cuffs looked like ordinary bracelets, but when the Dark One had ordered her to lean back against the wall, they had moved her body to obey his words.

Magic, Belle thought as she closed her eyes. That was another thing he had said: *You’ll have to get used to it.*

Morning sun shone brightly through the narrow windows at the top of the cell. Was it really possible that only one day ago she had woken up in her bedroom next to her cousins in a room full of village women? How could it be that life had been so ordinary so recently? Everything had changed so quickly. One moment they had been fighting for their lives and the next she was in the Dark One’s castle.

Her thoughts drifted to those she traded her lives for. What were they doing now? Had they even
begun to start rebuilding their lives? Had her friends been told about her yet? Did they know where she was, what she had done?

And that terrible deed had been well and truly done now. Belle opened her legs and tried to look down at her naked body. Would she be able to see a difference, now that she was no longer a maiden? The Dark One had done that to her. He had taken her, just as she had told him he could.

It hadn’t been as bad as she had feared. Ermentrude had never told the girls exactly what to expect from a wedding night, but there had been heavy hints that pain would be involved. And for all the Dark One was fearsome, he had not hurt her, not intentionally.

He had actually given her pleasure. Belle felt a shameful pride in being able to recognize the feeling. All those nights when she had touched herself in secret, seeking an answer to her body’s question—she had never imagined that a man would be able to give her that same satisfaction. Or that he would want to.

She used to think men only wanted women for children. For a long time, Belle had thought that having children was the only reason people married at all, the only reason grooms took their brides to bed. When she was older, Belle found out how men could desire women even more than they desired sons. She knew now that they could take pleasure in the making of children more than in the having of them. But it had never, ever, occurred to her that women could find pleasure in their interactions with men.

The Dark One didn’t desire children. The potion he gave her would keep her from having any. Belle had spent most of her life expecting to be a wife and a mother. And now she knew she would never be either.

What would her mother think of that? Belle couldn’t yet consider the question of what her mother would think of the deal she had made, but she could let herself wonder about being childless. What if she could tell Mama she would never have a grandchild? Her mother would be sad, of course, but surely understanding. The gods didn’t bless everyone with all the children they wanted. Belle herself had no brothers or sisters, though of course her parents wanted them. Mama would say it was no crime to have no children, especially if Belle’s husband didn’t mind.

And what would Mama say if Belle told her she had no husband? That she was a whore in the service of the most evil creature in the world?

Belle shut her eyes against her tears and dug her fingernails into her palms. That question hurt too much to dwell on. Besides, it didn’t matter what her mother would have thought. Mama was dead. The ogres had killed Mama and the Dark One had killed the ogres. He had put a stop to the violence and the terror. He had saved them. His opinion was the only one that mattered anymore.

Was that why he had taken her necklace? That necklace was the last part of Lady Collette that existed in any way more real than a memory. Did the Dark One remove it from Belle as a way to remove her mother’s influence? Perhaps it was a way to protect Mama’s memory, by keeping her possession far from all the ways he planned to debase Belle.

As long as Belle wore the necklace, she was her mother’s daughter, her people’s lady, her friend’s companion. When he took it, he had severed those connections. He had broken the chain that tied her to her old life and replaced it with shackles binding her to him.

At least that was Belle’s hypothesis. She wanted to believe that the Dark One had more reason to steal from her than just spite. No doubt he was cruel, but there had to be a reason, a method behind his cruelty. If she could understand it, if she could understand him, that might make the rest of her
life easier.

Her arms ached. She felt like a prisoner in the stocks, strung up and left to rot. They did that to thieves at home, to make an example of them. Families would come to the town square and show their children what happened when they were wicked. Older boys would pass time by throwing rotten food at the criminals. At least Belle was spared that. And she was able to sit. And she was inside, not exposed to the burning sun or soaking rain. It could be worse.

If nothing else, Belle had the conviction that she had done nothing wrong. This wasn’t a punishment, as far as she could tell. She had obeyed the orders the Dark One had given her. He had said he was pleased with her. But now it pleased him to leave her like this, leave her alone and aching and wondering what would happen next.

The sunlight on the wall had risen higher as she had been thinking. It wasn’t noon yet, as far as she could tell, but time had passed. How long would she have to stay like this? What was she supposed to do while she was waiting?

Nothing, he had said while he had played with her in the darkness. He had wanted her to do nothing. And now she had no choice. Belle made herself comfortable on the bench, rested her head against the pillow, and closed her eyes.

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“Hop up, dearie! Look alert!”

She heard his voice and felt her body moving before she even opened her eyes. Her hands were loosed from the wall and they pulled her forward off the bench so she was standing at attention when she blinked into wakefulness.

It was late evening. The light in the cell had turned the rosy orange of sunset. The Dark One was standing in the doorway. He had his hands behind his back and a pleased expression on his face.

“Walk over here to me,” he ordered with a clear, direct voice.

Belle lifted her foot, but saw her arms raise up and move forward, dragging the rest of her behind them before she could take a single step on her own. Her arms lowered when she stood in front of him and the Dark One’s look of vague enjoyment had become a self-satisfied smirk.

“Kiss my boots.”

Now she was pulled to the ground so suddenly that her teeth knocked together when her knees hit the stone. She shouted at the pain and the cuffs locked her in place, as bound to the floor as she had been to the wall.

His boots were in front of her face—gray, scaled leather that laced up to his knees. There was a slight heel to them, as though the Dark One wanted to make himself look taller. Belle was in the middle of questioning his vanity when she realized she hadn’t obeyed him yet.

The cuffs had thrown her in front of his boots, but they hadn’t forced her to kiss them.

“I’m waiting, dearie.” His voice was sing-song, not angry. Nevertheless, Belle quickly pressed her
lips to the leather toes, on one foot and then the other.

“Good girl,” he said evenly. “Now stay down there and follow me.”

She watched the Dark One’s feet turn away and felt the cuffs pull her wrists along the ground. She tried to get to her feet, but her arms stayed level with the floor. They would drag her if she didn’t go along. Belle clenched her jaw and moved her legs to crawl on her hands and knees.

The Dark One retraced his steps from when he had led Belle to her prison the first time. She tried to lift her bare knees to keep her skin from scraping against the rough stone, but the Dark One walked at a brisk pace and the cuffs made her stay close. On this journey, he led her up, out of the dungeons and into the finer parts of the castle. The floor went from bare stone, to rushes, to rugs, to polished wood. He stopped her when she crawled onto a thick, lush carpet.

“Sit up,” he ordered. The cuffs pulled her arms to either side of her kneeling legs and locked into the carpet. Her bottom rested on her feet but the rest of her body was exposed to him. Crawling was hard work and she was panting, her breasts rising and falling with every breath.

Belle looked around and saw that she was in the dining room. Along the far wall, the curtains were drawn and the only light in the whole room was the flickering fireplace next to her. The warmth soaked into her naked skin, easing away the cold and aches from her day in the dungeon. She closed her eyes and let her breathing slow.

When she opened her eyes, the Dark One was looking at her. He was sitting in an armchair, one leg crossed over the other, his hands laced together over one knee. His face was still and pensive. He looked like he was studying her.

“The cuffs are working well,” he announced after a moment.

“Are they?” Belle winced to hear the sharpness in her voice. The Dark One wouldn’t want to hear her complain! She put more sweetness in her next words. “They seem to toss me around like a rag doll.”

He rewarded her objection with a grin. “They ensure your obedience, dearie. The cuffs will keep you safe. They’ll keep you from escaping.”

Now Belle couldn’t conceal her outrage. “I would never --!”

“You say that now but just you wait! These cuffs will make you keep your promises to me. They are our deal made manifest. You’ll wear them for as long as you’re mine.”

For the rest of her life she would wear his gold and obey his orders no matter what her will actually was. Belle bit down on her tongue to keep from telling him what she really thought of that sentence.

“What are you hungry?”

She blinked out of her ire. She was hungry. She hadn’t eaten since that last day at home. There had been too much happening since then to think of food. Odd that he would bring it up, that the Dark One would care about her hunger.

“I am,” she answered honestly.

“I thought so.” He waved his hand and Belle instantly smelled the fragrance of a thick and meaty stew. Her mouth watering, Belle looked down and saw a tray on the ground in front of her. Hot soup steamed up at her, thick with carrots and meat and barley. Next to the bowl there was a shallow goblet of dark red wine.
“Thank you, Da--Rumpelstiltskin,” she said, remembering at the last moment to address him the way he liked.

“Don’t thank me yet,” the Dark One said, his smile growing stale as he watched her.

Not understanding what the he meant, Belle tried to lift up her hands so she could take the tray and begin to enjoy her meal. At first, she thought that the cuffs were just stuck, that she would have to move her wrists a certain way to get them to release. For surely she would have freedom of her hands while she ate.

But when she looked up at the Dark One, she saw how delighted he was by her struggle. He was doing this on purpose. He wanted to frustrate and humiliate her!

“Oh, is that it?” She didn’t bother sounding pleasant. Anger felt good in her mouth, sharp and bitter, the only weapon she had. “Am I actually going to eat anything? Or is this display just to torment me?”

“Of course you’ll eat, dearie! Eventually. Mortal bodies need food. The question isn’t if you’re going to eat, but when, and under what circumstances. How hungry do you think you’ll get before you finally lower yourself to do what I want?”

Would it please him to starve her? She had promised to let him deny her anything in exchange for feeding her people. Would it hurt him at all to see her wither before his eyes? How many times would this scene play out? Would they fight like this, meal after meal, for days or weeks? How hungry would she get before she submitted to his will?

She was already hungry. The soup was directly under her mouth. All she had to do was accept what the Dark One wanted from her. He wanted her to be lowly and miserable and grotesque. It pleased him. Perhaps it even aroused his passions. And it was her duty to do what pleased this monster.

For Belle anger was always a flame that burned brightly and faded quickly. It was so tiresome to be angry for very long. It would be tiresome to fight with the Dark One over petty details when he already owned her. This was the first meal of her new life. The least she could do was face her humiliation with dignity.

Belle leaned forward and lowered herself over the bowl. She bowed her head so he wouldn’t see her face as she lapped up the soup like a dog at his feet.

It was a good meal. That made everything worse. The meat was tender, the carrots soft, the wine sweet and refreshing. If she closed her eyes and thought only of the taste and the fullness in her belly, it was fine. It was only when she remembered that she was eating off the ground for the amusement of a monster that the whole ordeal became wretched.

The tips of her hair fell into the soup. As she ate, Belle felt the broth drying on her cheeks. It itched. She had no napkin to clean her face and no hands to use a napkin with anyway. She realized that when she bent over, the Dark One could see her bottom. That made her remember all over again that she was naked and exposed and he could take her whenever he wanted. She was at his mercy and he could be as cruel as he wanted to her. He could kill her now and no one would ever know the difference.

Her stomach tightened and Belle couldn’t eat another bite. She sat up on her heels with her hands still bound to the carpet. She bared her breasts but lowered her eyes so she didn’t have to see his face.
“All done?” His voice was bright, mockingly friendly. It made Belle angry all over again.

She clenched her teeth and nodded.

“Where are your manners, dearie?”

“Table manners are for tables,” Belle spat. If he wanted a lady he would treat her like a lady.

The Dark One was silent and when Belle finally looked him in the eye, his face broke into a wide grin.

“You want a table?” He jerked his head to the wooden table that made this room a dining room. “Go to it, and see if that makes you more polite.”

The cuffs yanked Belle to her feet and she ran to keep up with her arms. They stopped suddenly at the long end of the table and she crashed sharply into the edge. A noise--high-pitched and pained--escaped Belle’s throat. The cuffs dragged her hands over the tabletop until they had reached the other end and Belle had to stand on her tiptoes. The position smushed her face into the polished wood until she turned her head. Her bottom rested on the edge, an attractive target for anyone who wanted to hurt her.

The Dark One’s footsteps were soft behind her. From the corner of her eye she saw him look her body up and down before he flopped heavily into the only chair and put his feet on the table near her face.

“Shall we try that again, girl? After I’ve fed you, you will say…?”

“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin.” Belle said quickly. She was so stupid! Stupid for showing her anger and stupid now for letting fear take control of her. How could she be cowed so easily? If the Dark One wanted to hurt her, was a little politeness going to stop him? Why should she bother acting the way he wanted when she was doomed anyway? Why was she giving in to him?

“And if you think you’ve done something that might have displeased me you say?”

“I’m sorry, Rumpelstiltskin. I apologize, Rumpelstiltskin. Forgive me, Rumpelstiltskin,” she groveled like a coward. She had to hope it would matter. He could hurt her, but perhaps he wouldn’t. If she begged him perhaps he wouldn’t.

“Three times, nice touch,” he muttered. “Kiss my boots, girl.”

The cuffs released her and Belle pulled herself up to his feet. Without hesitation, Belle placed frantic kisses along the scaley leather, covering the toes of each boot. This was the old tradition, after all. To kiss a lord’s boots and beg him for mercy. This was what he had asked from her from the beginning, the only thing she had that he couldn’t just take. Kissing his boots revealed her lowliness. She was disgusting, pathetic, pitiful. But perhaps he would have pity on her.

“That’s enough.” He lowered his feet and shooed her away.

Belle crawled off the table and stood in front of him, waiting to be told what to do. She felt so strange. It was as though she had become more aware of the Dark One. She was on edge, ready to obey him, to give him whatever he asked for. Her pulse was racing and it wasn’t entirely fright.

“There is a wooden cupboard in the center cabinet,” he said. “I want you to open it and bring me my tea.”
Tea? The Dark One drank tea? How peculiar.

She was halfway to the cabinet before she realized her arms were at her sides. He had told her what he wanted, but he hadn’t given her an order. The cuffs hung loosely on her wrists, as inert as any ordinary jewelry. She walked to obey him—out of fear and out of weakness, but also of her own free will.

As he had said, in the center cabinet there was a carved wooden box with a door that opened like a cupboard. When she opened the door, she took out a silver tea tray and a set made of white porcelain with a print of sky-blue flowers. The set was light and lovely, a strange sight amidst the other dark and dangerous artefacts in the cabinet.

Steam rose from the teapot. A silver tin contained fragrant tea leaves and a spoon to scoop them out in. The cream and sugar bowl were both full. There were two blue and white teacups, but Belle knew she wouldn’t be invited to share in the Dark One’s refreshment—at least, not in any way she would enjoy.

“I’ll try to remember to feed you every day,” he said, as though he were just making conversation and not talking about a vital need.

“I appreciate that,” she said coolly. He was probably just needling her, trying to provoke her into anger. He liked it when she talked back, but he also liked to frighten her after she did. So it was just as well to stay polite.

Belle scooped some tea leaves into a cup and poured the steaming water over it.

“Myself, I eat rarely, but you will serve me when I do, or if I entertain. And you will give me tea with cream and three sugars.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.” Taking three sugars for one cup was a greater sign of wealth than spinning straw into gold. She stirred the prepared tea and began to walk the cup and saucer over to him.

“I’ll wake you whenever I want to fuck you, and every night before you sleep you’ll have to pleasure your cunt until you orgasm.” His tone didn’t change and it took Belle half a second to make what he had said.

When she understood, she dropped the teacup.

As soon as it happened, she didn’t know if she was more startled by the Dark One’s obscene declaration or by the noise of the teacup hitting the wooden floor. The tea splashed onto the ground at Belle’s feet. The saucer spun away to safety on its rim. But the cup… The cup had landed on its side, the outer edge bearing the brunt of the impact. Belle picked it up and her stomach tightened.

It was chipped.

“Oh no,” she groaned. This was how it would start. She had promised to allow him to hurt her and now he had a perfect opportunity. She had broken one of his things and now he had every right to break her. Perhaps he would chip her teeth, or carve out a chunk of her flesh.

“What is it?” His voice cut through her thoughts and fears.

Holding the damaged object out to him, Belle stepped forward to accept her punishment. “I broke it,” she confessed.

“Let me see.”
The cuffs pulled her closer to him and held her hands up so he could look at the teacup. With one delicate finger, the Dark One picked it up by the rim. He examined the chip and then looked up at her.

“Do you think I’m going to hurt you for this, Belle?”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin, I do.” It was a relief to be honest with him, to admit that she was afraid.

With a half-grin, the Dark One set the cup down on the table and leaned back in his chair. “Well, I’m not,” he said. “Not for that.”

Belle swallowed. “Really? Even though I broke it?”

“But you didn’t mean to break it. You didn’t disobey me, my girl. You didn’t set out to damage the cup, so I shan’t set out to damage you. It’s called an accident. I won’t punish you for it.”

It had been a relief to admit her fear. It was more of a relief to know there was no reason for her to be afraid.

“Now, if I ordered you to serve me tea and you offered me this chipped cup, I might take that as an insult and hurt you for that. But this? It’s just a cup! I won’t hurt you for the crime of being startled.”

Belle felt herself shaking with relief. “Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He waved away her gratitude. “Bring me another tea, and then stand with your palms on the table.”

This time, the cuffs pulled her and Belle was too overwhelmed to fight them. She let her body relax and be used. Once the Dark One was served, they locked her against the table, standing up with her hands pressed against the wood.

The Dark One took a sip of his tea and then set it down in the saucer.

“So!” he said. “Do you want to tell me why you dropped the teacup?”

“I was startled,” Belle confessed, looking down at the wood. She could see the outline of her reflection but no details of her face. The Belle that was speaking to the Dark One might as well have been a different person.

“What startled you?”

She looked over at him. “You did, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Me?” he played at acting surprised. “Whatever did I do?”

“It was… your language,” Belle swallowed. “Your words. I’m not used to hearing them.”

He scoffed. “Innocence is tacky on a whore.”

“Then you should have dealt for a whore instead of a maiden!” Belle snapped. It felt good to speak her mind, to be honest with him.

The Dark One didn’t seem to mind. His mouth twitched and he took another sip of tea.

“You are a whore, dearie. Just not a good one yet. Perhaps a lesson in shop talk, hmm?”

“What does that mean?”
“It means I’m going to say certain words and you’re going to repeat them. I want you to learn these words, practice saying them, get used to hearing them. I want you to think these words until they are a part of your everyday vocabulary. Do you understand?”

Belle sighed. At least he told her the rules of this game. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He drank his tea. “We’ll start off easy, something I ought to have brought to your attention earlier. Say please.”

“Please,” Belle said quickly.

“Please who?”

“Please, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“Correct! You’ll be doing a fair amount of begging, so please is an important word. So is, thank you.”

“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“See? You’re a clever thing. And never underestimate the value of good manners. I don’t use them myself, but I appreciate them in other people. Say whore.”

Belle took a breath and said, “Whore.”

“Use it in a sentence.”

She thought of what he would want her to say. “I am a whore.”

“That’s true. But whose whore are you?”

“Yours, Rumpelstiltskin. I am your whore. I am Rumpelstiltskin’s whore.”

The Dark One grinned and held his teacup over his chest, as though her declaration had warmed his heart. “Say slut.”

“Slut?” Belle blinked. “Why is that a bad word?”

“Why isn’t it? What do you think it means?”

“A slovenly woman, a bad housekeeper.”

“Is that what you think?” Quick as a snake, he gulped his tea and stood by her side. “A slut,” he hissed in her ear, “is a woman who likes fucking. Are you a slut, girl?”

Belle’s mouth went dry. It was so strange to have him near her. She wanted to back away but the cuffs wouldn’t let her move. “I-I don’t know. What is fucking?”

The Dark One giggled and stepped away from her. “You were a maiden, weren’t you?” He came back to the table and leaned against it so he could look Belle in the face. “Fucking is what we did last night. Fornication. Did you like it?”

It was a word so filthy she had never heard it in her old life. She blushed scarlet and nodded that yes, she had liked it.

“So what does that make you, my girl?”
“I am a slut, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“My slut.” His breath was hot in her ear, his fingers scratching down her spine. “And why are you my slut as well as my whore?”

She arched her back away from his touch, closed her eyes and confessed: “Because I liked fucking.”

The Dark One chuckled deep in his chest. “And that’s the only attribute a whore really needs. Although you do have other lovely attributes.” His inhuman eyes went up and down her body. “Say tits.”

He was staring at her breasts. “Tits,” Belle said softly. If she had use of her hands she would have covered herself. His gaze was so voracious, so lustful, it made her shiver.

He titled his head to look at her behind. “Say arse.”

“Ass.”

“I’ll allow it. Now say cunt.”

“Cunt.” That was a word she had heard before, though she had never spoken it aloud.

“Wet.”

“Wet. You said I was wet last night, but you never said if that was a good thing.”

“Oh, it’s very good, my whore. If a woman is wet that means she’s ready to fuck.”

“Oh.” Belle had often found her secret places slippery with moisture. Did that mean her body had been ready for a man to take her and she’d had no idea?

“Now let’s switch the lesson over. Say cock, little whore.”

Why did adding ‘little’ make the ‘whore’ part worse? “C-cock,” Belle repeated over her pounding heartbeat.

“And that won’t be the last time you choke on my cock!”

If she asked him to, he would explain what that meant. But Belle was already too stunned by the lessons he’d taught her so far. She didn’t want to know. Not yet.

“Say hard.”

“Hard.”

“That’s the word for when a man is ready to fuck. When my cock is hard, I’ll go looking for you and your cunt. And your arse. And your mouth. Your hands too. Every inch of you is at my disposal.”

“I understand, Rumpelstiltskin.” Inside the cuffs, her hands closed and unclosed. “Um.”

“Yes?”

“Well,” Belle spoke slowly, trying to make use of her new vocabulary. “If you seek me out when your body is ready to fuck—when your cock is hard—should I do the same?”

He looked at her, his nose wrinkled in disgust. “What?”
“If I find my body--my cunt--if I find it wet, should I try to find you? So we can fuck?”

The Dark One opened his mouth and then closed it. He did this several times without speaking.

Belle kept looking at him, honestly confused. Surely it wasn’t that unreasonable a question!
“Rumpelstiltskin?”

“Take your hands off the table.” Even though it was an order, his voice was only a breath above a whisper. “I want you to lie down on your back on the carpet and spread your legs.”

The cuffs lifted Belle’s hands up but didn’t pull her over to the carpet. She set herself in front of the armchair so the Dark One could have a good view of her body.

After a moment, he sat down and stared at her.

“Belle,” he said in his calm voice, “I would have the truth from you. How often do you find your body wet?”

“I don’t keep track,” she said. “I try not to touch that area very often.”

“But you do touch it?”

“Yes.”

“When?” She could see him swallow. “How? I want to know about your pleasure.”

Belle heistated. But there was no reason not to tell him. He wasn’t even demanding her. He seemed curious. He seemed desperate for the knowledge. And it felt so good to tell him the truth.

“I always wanted to do it at bath time,” she began, saying words she had never said to anyone. “It made sense to me. I was already naked, I was already… rubbing. But I was never alone when I bathed--my cousins and our maids would all bathe after me. It was a social time, not… private.”

“But when did you? What did you think of?”

He hadn’t told her where to put her hands. They were free now and she could move them around. She spread them out on the outside of her thighs.

“I would do it in bed,” she said. “I would wait until my friends were asleep--or sometimes I awoke in the middle of the night. I tried not to, but sometimes the desire was so relentless I couldn’t sleep until I did it.”

“What did you do?”

“Can I show you? May I do it now?” What madness had taken hold of her that she would ask those questions? She wanted to display her wicked secrets for the Dark One’s perusal. It was the same shameless courage that made her want to confess her hidden desires. In that moment she wanted to tell him everything, show him everything, give him everything.

“Yes, Belle. I want you to show me how you pleasure your cunt.”

A shiver went up her spine at those words. She lay her head back and moved one hand from her thighs to her curls. It felt different with the cuff on her wrist, the hard metal pressing against her soft flesh. Her other hand stayed on her thigh, but she was ready to move it up to her breast.

“I’m wet now,” she said as her fingers pushed open the first layer of flesh.
“I can see that. You glisten beautifully. Can you keep talking?”

“Tell me what to say.” It was hard to think of anything when she was occupied by the slippery pleasure between her legs.

“Will you tell me what you thought of when you touched yourself? Did you have a man in your mind?”

“No one man,” she said. “And no one real, usually. Just… the idea of a man. I would imagine my future husband, my future wedding night.”

“With that boy? That little toy soldier who thought he was a man?”

Belle laughed at the Dark One’s accuracy. “I tried! I tried to think about Gaston. But he was so boring and he didn’t seem interested in me. He didn’t want me, so I didn’t want him.”

“Who did you want?”

“Men.” Belle closed her eyes and spread the moisture around. “Men who wanted me so much it frightened me. Men who would take me over and over again, who wouldn’t care about hurting me.”

“Monsters,” the Dark One murmured.

“Old men,” she said. “Ugly and odious, selfish and cruel. The kind of men who ogled us in the marketplace.”

“And they hurt you?”

“I imagined them being rough, with grabbing hands and slobbering mouths. Even if they weren’t cruel they were thoughtless and crude, groping me, forcing me to kiss them, to embrace them.” Her back arched and Belle put her hand to her breast, squeezing the flesh like she imagined her husband would, squeezing so hard it hurt.

“What else?” The Dark One’s voice was close to her now. The heat of his body was so close he must have been lying next to her on the ground. But he didn’t touch her now. “Tell me what else you imagined.”

“My husband would be the lord of his castle,” Belle’s voice became weak as her pleasure mounted. “And he could take his wife anywhere, in front of anyone.”

“You crave an audience?”

“No, I don’t want it, I don’t want any of that. But I feared it, so I made myself think of it. Until I could accept it. Until I could–” she couldn’t speak anymore. Her body clenched against her fingers and her breath came in sharp pants and she curled into a ball and rolled onto her side. She faced the fire, the warmth washing over her closed eyes. She breathed deeply and allowed herself to feel her pleasure, feel her peace.

There was the lightest touch on her shoulder. Behind her, Rumpelstiltskin pushed tendrils of hair off her neck. “Good girl,” his voice was gentle. “You’re going to do that every night, before you sleep, from now on.”

Wordless, Belle nodded.

“You need to know what your pleasure is, my dear. And you need to tell me. When we’re together, I
“I want to know what pleases you--what truly pleases you, not just what you think I want to hear. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle murmured as she looked into the dancing flames.

“And when the time comes, I want to know what hurts you as well.”

“But you want to hurt me.”

“Of course I do,” he teased softly. “That’s why I want to know what will do the trick. And what is too much. I might not stop hurting you, but I always want to know how you are.”

“When will the hurting start?”

“Later. There is pleasure yet to have before the pain begins.”

“Oh,” Belle said. Her head had finally cleared and she turned to look at the Dark One. They were lying together but he was still wearing all of his clothes. “What now?”

“Now?” he grinned at her. “Now I satisfy my desires.”

He was on top of her and inside her more quickly than she would have thought possible. There was no awkwardness now. None of the fumbling and pain that had marked their first time. His coat draped on the floor over her naked body.

In the firelight, she could see his face. He wasn’t just a feeling in the darkness now, he was a man--or a man-shaped creature, at least. His skin was dark, almost green, and flecks of gold glimmered when they caught the light.

His expression changed over the course of the act. When he first entered her, his eyes were closed and his face blissful.

“Your pleasure is so perfect,” he whispered. He took long, slow strokes inside her, and Belle gasped at her enjoyment of it. She understood, now, how important it was to be wet. He fit inside her, smooth and easy, filling her up to the brim.

Then the Dark One got to work--steadily, rhythmically pumping in her. Now his eyes where screwed up, his expression the satisfied grimace of a man doing physical labor. He braced himself to the floor, his hands grabbing at the carpet over Belle’s head. She had the vague impulse to offer him her hands to clutch, but feared that he would break her bones in his passion.

As before, his thrusts grew faster and faster. He began to breathe heavily, panting like a runner. Abruptly, he opened his eyes, saw her looking at him. For a moment, they stared at each other. His eyes were large and black as an empty sky. Belle tried to say something, but he covered her mouth with his. The kiss was sloppy and wet. He pulled her off the floor to embrace her. His arms squeezed so tightly she lost her breath for a moment. His hands grabbed her flesh, his nails digging in to her back and that was when he found his satisfaction.

He shouted and Belle felt that heat between her legs, that pulse of fluid that signaled his completion.

Panting still, Rumpelstiltskin slowly took his hands away from Belle’s body. She leaned back to the floor, supporting herself up on her elbows. He was sitting up, between her legs, but angled away from her, looking down at the carpet.

She wanted to say something, wanted to talk to him, but he wasn’t looking at her. What could she
say? What could they talk about after that?

After a moment he got up and stood by his armchair. He rested his hand on the wingback but kept his back to Belle.

“Rumpelstiltskin?” she said tentatively. “What should I do now?”

“Stand up,” he ordered and the cuffs pulled her into obedience. His voice was so calm it was almost still. He wouldn’t look at her. “The cuffs will take you back to your cell. You have the rest of the evening to yourself. You may sleep whenever you like, but be sure to touch yourself first. I will come for you when I want you. Now go.”

His behavior was so strange, so stilted. Belle wanted nothing more than to talk to him, to try to understand what had happened. Had she done something wrong?

But the cuffs were already pulling her away, forcing her to leave him, a lone figure in an empty room.
The Mouth

Chapter Summary

Rumpelstiltskin makes use of another part of Belle’s body

Chapter Notes

Content warning, this chapter has more dubcon fantasies

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cuffs pulled Belle’s arms to the dungeon and the rest of her struggled to keep up. She tried to dig her heels in, to force herself to stop or even just slow down, but the cuffs were implacable. The Dark One had ordered her to go to her cell and they would make certain she obeyed him.

At least the cuffs knew where they were going. Belle would have been lost in this labyrinth of a castle, so much bigger than home. Her father’s castle didn’t have a dungeon at all—the cold cellars were used to store salted meat and root vegetables. Her village had neither enemies nor criminals enough to justify having a space to hold them. Here, the Dark One seemed to have an entire floor devoted to torturing people. The cuffs took her past a dozen doors before pulling her into the cell that was her room.

The pull stopped when she stepped through the doorway. It was nighttime again, but her eyes adjusted to seeing by faint moonlight.

Belle lowered her arms and shook some feeling back into them. She stretched her hands over her head, enjoying the freedom of being able to move any way she liked. The cuffs had dragged her like a kite on a windy day and Belle’s arms and shoulders ached from fighting a force so much stronger than herself.

She wasn’t used to this much exertion, to feeling her body ache so keenly. A lady’s life was a sedentary one. She was supposed to sit and sew, sit and talk, sit and read. All of her duties were work, of course, but they were hardly exercise. As she grew into womanhood, she was expected to put away her urges to run around and play like a child. Over the years she had found her mind disconnecting from her body in what she had assumed was maturity.

Belle had almost forgotten the muscles in her thighs. She hadn’t felt them since she was a girl and her cousin Andre had shown her how to ride a horse the way he had been taught—with both legs astride the saddle. For weeks they had practiced in secret. They would go out with Belle in a proper riding habit, sitting side-saddle like a lady, but once they were away from supervision Belle would hitch up her skirts and gallop like a knight. It was only when Ermentrude had noticed her walking bow-legged that she was found out and the lessons put an end to.

Even then the exercise had hurt, she wasn’t used to having her body so stretched and worn. But it had also given her a secret thrill, to know that she had come by her pain from learning something forbidden. Now her thighs hurt from having the Dark One between her legs. That was also
exhilarating, another experience she had never imagined having. Her pain came from doing her duty and pleasing him.

That is, assuming he was actually pleased with her. He hadn’t seemed so when he had sent her away. His manner had been formal, distant—as though something were distracting him. He hadn’t looked at her since he had seen her looking at him. But if taking her didn’t please him, what would?

Belle rubbed her face and went to use the bucket in the corner. The petticoats she had been wearing on her last day at home were still on the floor where she had folded them. The one that had been touching the ground was half-ruined. Dirt and rot had seeped into the linen from the filthy floor. She couldn’t wear it now. With a sad sigh, Belle ripped part of her wedding ensemble into strips and used them to clean herself up.

It didn’t hurt between her legs, in the place where husbands went—where the Dark One had put his manhood. She had expected so much pain. She had expected to be torn asunder. But it wasn’t that bad. He hadn’t hurt her any more than it seemed he could help. He certainly hadn’t given her the torture she had allowed him.

Her knees disagreed with that assessment. They were rubbed raw from crawling on the stone floor and kneeling at the Dark One’s feet. For all the pain they felt, there ought to have been a trail of blood marking her path to the dining room. But there wasn’t. That pain was just irritating the way small cuts are always irritating. Belle sat on the bench to examine at her scrapes but felt something soft on the wood.

What was she touching? By the light of the moon, Belle could see her sky-blue pillow on the bench. That wasn’t the object in her hands now. It felt like a loose bundle, like fabric, slippery and cool. It was material, Belle realized as she spread it out in front of her, thinner and finer than even her golden gown.

When she unfolded the material, she saw a piece of shining gold fall from the bundle and flutter to the ground. It was a small rectangle, like a calling card, but glowing like the last ember in a fire. Holding the fabric up against her chest, Belle bent down and picked the gold up off the floor. It was a calling card, and there was something written on it:

A reward for your honesty.

As soon as Belle had read the words, the card disappeared and the glow dissipated into a thousand golden sparks. For a moment, the sparks hung in the air, each one perfectly still around her head, as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Then the sparks flew to the material and scattered over it, spark by spark landing and joining and becoming a pattern of loops and whorls that shone in the darkness, revealing the material for what it was.

A robe.

The golden patterns faded and the glow dimmed into darkness, but Belle still felt the tingle of magic as she held the robe up to her body. It was from him. A gift. For her.

She shook her head. No, it wasn’t a gift. The note had made it very clear, this was a reward. For her honesty. For telling him her private thoughts and fantasies, the Dark One had given her a treat, like the good pet she was. He was just paying her, because she was a whore.

His whore, Belle corrected herself as she opened the robe and covered her nakedness. The Dark One owned her body, he could decorate it however he liked. And he could control her actions, he could
make her wear anything. If he wanted to, he could dress her in sackcloth and rags.

Instead he had put her in something soft and fine and unspeakably rich. He had created a moment of magic in presenting it to her. He had rewarded her. Belle could not discount that.

And it was made to fit her perfectly. The hem stopped just at her ankles, without dragging on the floor. The sleeves were cut exactly long enough to display her cuffs before an extra bit of fabric trailed down to her knees in a decorative flourish. It fit her well across the shoulders but stayed open at the front.

Frowning, Belle tried to cover herself and found that she couldn’t. There was a sash in belt loops that went around Belle’s waist, but the rest of the robe lacked fastenings. She would have to hold the collar closed to conceal her bosom. There was nothing she could do to keep her legs out of sight, or to hide her secret places. Even wearing this robe, Belle was exposed and open to the Dark One’s gaze. When he looked at her, he would still see everything he wanted to see.

Belle crossed her arms over her bare chest, told herself that it didn’t matter. She had been naked already in front of him, as naked as she had been born, and she had gotten used to it. But now that she had a semblance of modesty, the lack of any meaningful privacy became all the more apparent. He’d left exposed the only parts of her that he wanted to look at, that only parts of her that mattered to him.

But he was covering the rest of her, and covering her in something lovely. And she was warmer than she had been last night. The robe was keeping her warm. Did the magic in the cloth contain an enchantment to keep her comfortable? Or was it just wearing anything over her skin helped to retain the heat? She would ask him, when she saw him again.

It felt strange, to know with certainty that she would see the Dark One again. He would take her, of course, and probably find some new way to humiliate her. But he would also answer her questions. He would want to talk to her. Belle blinked several times and realized that she wanted him to talk to her. She was glad that she would get another chance to talk to him, even it meant more degradation.

How could it be that she enjoyed his company? Why wasn’t she afraid of him? How could she find the Dark One a pleasant companion? How could she seek out his conversation—even knowing that he was sure to tell her vile, vulgar things and that she might end up in tears?

Was it just the physical pleasure? That was certainly more than she had ever expected out of this deal, or out of life in general. She had never imagined a man might touch her in a way that would make her jerk and shout and convulse with ecstasy. She had never imagined herself in bed with a man who cared about her comfort during the marital act. She had never imagined a man who would order her to seek pleasure on her own.

But the Dark One had ordered her to touch her body. He had watched her do it, and listened to her awful imaginings. She had told him her fears and her fascinations, she had bared her soul as nakedly as her body. She had opened herself to him in every way, revealing everything about her that was shameful, secret. And he had not judged her. He had not condemned her for her thoughts or her actions. He wanted her to find her own pleasure, no matter what form it took. He had ordered her to think on dark and desperate deeds.

Belle put one hand to her neck and slid it down to where her robe opened. She felt her breast through the silky fabric--warm and round under her fingers, soft except for the hardened nipple. Men loved her breasts. Gaston’s father had spent most of the betrothal feast looking down her dress. She pinched herself, the way that awful man might have pinched her if she was ever foolish enough to be alone with him. Her father-in-law, the Duke, would ravish his own son’s wife without a second
And he wasn’t the only one. Belle was young, but she had already endured years of men wanting her. She felt safe with her family, but visiting lords would leer at her courteously. Wandering minstrels would sing songs to her of love and beauty. If she walked through her the courtyard in her own castle, the horse grooms and young knights would stop what they were doing to watch her pass by.

Belle lay down on the bench with her head on her pillow and her hands opening her robe. Did those men want her exactly as the Dark One wanted her? Did their manhoods react the way he said his did? She thought the words he had taught her: Did their cocks become hard? Did they want to fuck her?

Hearing the words put so bluntly, even in her own mind, gave Belle a flurry of desire. It was a strange, wicked pleasure and she wanted more. She slipped her hand between her legs, into her cunt. She was wet, which meant she was ready to fuck. That was what the Dark One wanted. He wanted to fuck her. So many men wanted to fuck her and he was the only one that could. Because he had paid for her. She was a whore, a slut. She was a slut because she liked this. She wanted to do these filthy deeds, to think vile thoughts and say wicked words.

She rubbed herself, rubbed her cunt, and felt the hot wetness cover her folds. She pushed her fingers in and out, the way Rumpelstiltskin did with his cock. Then she found the one spot that made her gasp and quake. She kept rubbing, touching that spot until her body couldn’t bear it.

Oh, but she would have to bear it, wouldn’t she? The Dark One was her master now and he was merciless. He would force her to pleasure herself every night, no matter what she wanted.

Her husband wouldn’t have cared what she wanted. Belle’s mind slipped into her old fantasy: Her wedding night, the married life she now knew she would never have, a husband who could have been any man. She wouldn’t have a choice in who she married. Any man rich enough or important enough could have sought her hand and won it.

She rubbed herself, still preparing for the terrible husband she would never wed. A complete stranger would marry her and would make her open herself to him, would force himself inside her, would push his cock up into her cunt and fuck her. It would hurt. It would hurt so much and she would scream and fight and no one would rescue her. No one would help her so she would have to bear it, have to endure have to--

Her body jerked and her secret places clenched around her fingers. With a grunt, Belle pressed her hand in deeper and felt herself throbbing. She curled up on her side and let the pleasure overtake her. Breathing deeply, Belle closed her eyes and felt utterly at peace.

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She woke when he pulled at her hands. It was still dark and she felt him grip her over the cuffs. Belle heard the Dark One sniff at her fingers, felt the warmth of his breath. Then the warmth became a heat and a wetness and she realized he was tasting her.

He put her fingers into his mouth. The fingers she had just used to pleasure herself. He sucked them into his mouth, drawing her deeply into himself, licking and lapping at her until he pulled her fingers out with an obscene pop.
“Oh,” Belle sighed.

She could imagine his grin, cocky and amused. He took her hands, had her sit up, and placed her fingers over her own lips, still holding her by the wrist. She smelled the pungent odor of her pleasure, briny and wild. Her fingers were still damp with his saliva.

“Kiss them,” he ordered.

Belle obeyed.

“Open your mouth.”

She did, and he put her fingers against her tongue.

“Lick them. Suck them.” He held her hand in his and moved her fingers around her mouth. She gave herself the same treatment he had given her. He put his other hand on the back of her head and wound his fingers into her tangled hair.

“Why?” she whispered once he took her hand away from her lips. Something about the darkness and his manner made her want to speak softly. It seemed more intimate.

“Practice,” he said in the same hush. With his free hand, he touched Belle’s face, rubbing gently against her chin and jaw.

“Practice for what?”

In answer, the Dark One put his own fingers to her lips. “Kiss,” he said, and she kissed him. “Now, open.”

His fingers were larger than hers and she had to open her mouth wider to fit them in. He put his first two fingers in her mouth and pushed them back into her throat until she coughed and gagged. The noise was harsh in this sweet silence and she hated herself for spoiling it.

“Sorry,” she coughed.

But he hushed her and stroked her hair. “Try again,” he whispered with his hand pressed against her mouth. “Lick. Suck.”

His skin tasted salty and metallic. She ran her tongue down his fingers and even scraped it against his nails in a rough pressure that was almost pain. She sucked his fingers into her mouth. It was almost like having his manhood inside her secret places. The comparison was made even more obvious when he began to push and pull his hand in and out. Belle knew then for certain: He was fucking her mouth.

He rocked her head in a steady rhythm that had her entranced until he pulled away from her abruptly.

Belle blinked and kept her mouth open. “What’s next, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“Important things must be done in threes,” he said. He stood between her knees while she sat with her feet on the floor. With the hand in her hair, he pulled her head up to where he wanted it. “Kiss me, Belle.”

She had known that this was coming. Belle puckered her lips and placed a kiss on the Dark One’s manhood.

His voice was shaky as he whispered, “Open.”
The thing he put inside her mouth was hot and round and large. She had to open her mouth wider than she had for his fingers. The feeling of him overwhelmed her other senses. She couldn’t yet describe how it tasted or smelled, all that mattered was that he was in her mouth, filling her, controlling her.

Belle reached up to touch him, to lean on him and steady herself, but the cuffs jerked her hands away and locked them to the wall behind her.

“Just stay where you are,” he whispered. He kept one hand in her hair and the other holding her throat. “Trust me.”

With her mouth still full of him, she nodded.

“Lick and suck,” he ordered softly. “You can explore that way. But mind your teeth, dearie.”

It was so strange for Belle to have something in her mouth that was not meant to be chewed and swallowed. She did her best to suck on him without causing pain. From the noises her made, she was doing a decent job of pleasing him.

It seemed barely any time at all before the Dark One had put more of his manhood inside Belle’s mouth. He kept his hand on her throat so he could move her mouth up and down the length of him. She choked and gagged on him as he entered her fully. He pulled himself out of her mouth and gave her a moment.

“Breathe,” he ordered. “Let me know when you’re ready to start again.”

Leaning back in the darkness, Belle caught her breath. She stretched her jaw, and steadied her nerves. “I’m ready,” she whispered.

“Good girl,” he said. “Now I want you to kiss the length of my cock, up and down like when you kiss my boots.”

While she obeyed, Belle wondered at his comparison. Was it the same thing, in his eyes? He had her kiss his boots as a sign of humiliation. Was that the only reason he was using her the way he was now? Belle had so little knowledge of what a man would want, but it stood to reason that if a kiss on the mouth or the cheek was a sign of affection, a kiss in a more intimate place would not be unwelcome.

The Dark One had sucked on her breasts, that first night they were together. That had been wonderful. How could it be shameful now for her to suck on him? If using her mouth was his means to make her wretched, he was not succeeding.

Belle enjoyed feeling his manhood—his cock—under her lips. She began to open her mouth as she kissed him, darting her tongue along the skin. He groaned, and she knew this was an effective method. Growing bold, Belle used her tongue to stroke long lines where she had been kissing. When his cock was covered in her spittle he made a loud grunt and dug both hands into her hair.

“Open your mouth, you wanton thing,” he growled the order at her. “And hold still.”

This was the attack Belle had been expecting. This was the thrusting madness that he delivered to her womanly parts when he took her. His cock filled her so completely and relentlessly that all she could do was leave her jaw slack and let him have her. His hands pulled at her hair and pushed her in the rhythm that he wanted.

So close to her face, his passion became her whole world. The pounding of his thrusts into her mouth
became more real than her heartbeat. In the darkness, in the near-silence, nothing was real except the smell of him, the taste of him, the feeling of him inside her. It was overwhelming, like a thunderstorm inside her mouth.

He cried out and thrust a final time. Belle’s mouth filled with his hot, salty-tasting seed. She coughed and choked again, covering her mouth with both hands when Rumpelstiltskin stepped away from her. The cuffs had released her the moment he was finished. Fearing that she would be sick, Belle ran to the bucket in the corner.

She wasn’t sick, but she gagged and spat his seed into the bucket. Over and over she spat, bent over the slop bucket, kneeling on the ground. It was disgusting behavior and so undignified. Mixed in with her embarrassment, however, was the thought that perhaps he would be pleased by such a humiliating reaction.

“I know it’s revolting,” he said stiffly. “But pleasuring me with your mouth will be another of your regular duties.”

Leaning back on her heels, Belle wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Stand up,” he ordered. “Hold out your hands.”

The cuffs pulled her to her feet and had her stretch her arms out like a beggar. She felt the weight of a round object in her hands,

“Take it,” he ordered. “Drink your fill. Wash out the taste of me.”

It wasn’t the taste that had bothered her. The shock of his orgasm was unfamiliar and unpleasant in her mouth. His seed was so hot and so sudden. She wasn’t revolted by him, only surprised by what she didn’t know to expect. She would do better next time.

The cuffs put the object to her lips and she drank down clear, cold water.

“Don’t break this cup, dearie,” he said. “It’s rather valuable.”

Even as Belle wondered why, she heard the cup fill up again. She took a sip, and tasted more water.

“Drink as much as you like, it will never run dry.”

“That’s marvelous,” she smiled. “And thank you for the robe as well, it’s wonderful--”

“It’s nothing,” he cut her off. “I’m sure it’s a cold comfort when you consider what I’ve taken away from you.”

“Actually, it’s wonderfully warm and--”

“Stop,” he cut her off again, his voice firm and final. “Stop.”

Belle fell silent. Was he angry with her? Because she had spat out his seed? What else was one supposed to do with it? He hadn’t told her what he wanted, how could he be cross that she hadn’t done it?

She could hear his breathing in the darkness, heavy and labored. She couldn’t see him, couldn’t see his face or his body. What was he feeling? How could she best please him?

“Rumpelstiltskin?” she said meekly.
“What?” he snapped.

She took a breath before she asked. “What’s wrong?”

He scoffed and she could hear the bitterness in the sound. “Wrong? What could possibly be wrong? I have a desperate whore at my beck and call, ready to service every need my cock devises. How could anything ever be wrong?”

She winced. It was less that he called her a whore and more the cutting tone of his voice. He was mocking her again, sneering at the idea that she could help him, be of any use to him at all.

“It is my duty to pleasure you, Rumpelstiltskin. If I’m not…”

“I’ll let you know. I know how to get what I want out of a woman. But my world is bigger than your cunt, dearie. Don’t get any wild ideas of your own importance.”

Without another word, he vanished in a puff of glowing purple smoke, leaving Belle alone again in her dungeon.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! There will be no chapter next Friday because I will be on my honeymoon! I'm gonna go to Disney and try not to give Princess Belle too many weird looks. Feel free to spam my inbox: kelyon.tumblr.com

See you in March!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Belle slept with her new robe wrapped tightly around her body. The thin, smooth material provided enough warmth that she was able to sleep comfortably, even in the open dungeon. On this, her second night in the Dark One’s castle, she was able to lay down properly and curl up to sleep with her head on the pillow he had given her.

A pillow, a robe, and now a never-ending cup of water—the Dark One doled out comforts one by one, each a reward for her good service. Why did he bother being so generous? She had given him the right to take her and hurt her and deny her everything. That was the price they had agreed to, the payment for saving her people from the ogres. Surely she wasn’t giving him more than they’d bargained for. He didn’t need to repay her by treating her well.

The morning dawned gray and dreary, one of those dull autumn days that made Belle long for even the cruel brilliance of winter snow. When she opened her eyes, Belle had no way to tell how late it was. The sun would be just as flat and weak at dawn as at noon or twilight.

But even in this sad light, Belle could see well enough to admire her robe. It was a vibrant, lustrous blue, deep and rich as a precious gem. The golden sparks that had so enchanted her last night were still there in glimmering lines along the hem. Swirls of gold shone in a way that did not exactly reflect the natural light. It was a beautiful thing and Belle felt beautiful in it.

For all she was still in a dungeon, she felt well, overall. Her body hurt less than it had in the past few days. Her thighs didn’t feel as stretched, her back had grown accustomed to sleeping on a wooden bench. A slight ache in her jaw reminded her of what Rumpelstiltskin had taught her last night, the new way to please him with her mouth.

How often would he want her to do that? Was it more appealing for him than taking her the traditional way? Did it feel better for him, or did he just enjoy looking at her when she was gagging on his manhood? It hadn’t been humiliating or degrading for Belle, though the Dark One seemed to think of it that way. He seemed to think that act was worse for her than when he took her body.

But it wasn’t. Even as Belle took a drink from her water cup, then rinsed her mouth and spat into the waste bucket, she couldn’t say that having the Dark One use her mouth was any more or less terrible than letting him inside her secret places. Whatever way the Dark One wanted to pleasure himself with her body was within the terms of their deal.

The cup filled itself again, and Belle took another drink. It seemed a such an unassuming thing, glazed clay, small enough to fit in her palm. Who would suspect that this cup was magical? Around the brim, there was a design of slanted circles that changed subtly as they went around the cup. Examining the pattern, Belle thought that the circles might actually be letters, some alphabet she couldn’t read. What language was it? What did the words say?
Why had the Dark One given her something so valuable?

Perhaps he would let her ask him, when he arrived. Until he did, Belle decided to clean up a little.

The clothes she had worn to the castle were still in a pile on the floor. Her golden gown, her wedding dress, lay crumpled in a heap on the filthy ground. Belle picked it up and shook out the wrinkles as best she could. There was no place to keep it safe. Even if she folded it neatly, the dress would still crease. It would still be ruined no matter what she did. In the end, Belle decided to drape the dress through the iron bars in the window over her head. It almost looked like curtains. Perhaps that would keep out some of the cold.

She did the same with her silk stockings, tying them together so they would remain a pair. A ruined pair, perhaps, but at least they would stay together, like star-crossed lovers in a romance.

She placed her slippers under the bench near the water cup. The slippers she had worn on her last day as a free woman. Did she dare wear them now? It seemed the Dark One wanted her barefoot. If he caught her wearing shoes he might take them away as he had her necklace. Even if Belle could never use her slippers, she would rather have them near her than stolen.

One of her petticoats was already ripped in half. Part of the linen had been touching the damp dungeon ground and the mildew had seeped into the fabric. So last night Belle had ripped the undamaged side into rags that she might find a use for. The other petticoat was fine, so she folded it into a square and placed it under her pillow.

Picking up the cup again, Belle gulped down all the water and watched the cup fill itself. She took the it over the slop bucket—which had magically emptied itself during the night--and turned the cup over into it. Water poured out steadily, a stream that didn’t end.

“Mmm-hm!” Belle grinned. Just as she’d thought.

She set the cup down for a moment, then slipped off her robe and looped it around one of the iron bars in the windows. Naked, she took one of the linen rags and poured a cupful of water over it. When the rag was soaked through, Belle brought it to her face and began to wash.

The water was cold, but Belle told herself to think of it as bracing, refreshing. It was better than being dirty. She rubbed her face and neck and behind her ears, shivering all the while. When she was done she wrung excess water into the waste bucket and poured more from the cup.

There was no soap, so she couldn’t call herself truly clean, but she still felt better for trying. Cold water droplets ran down her back and between her breasts. She stretched her arms over her head and scrubbed up and down the length of them. She washed underneath her breasts and in the crooks of her elbows and knees. Belle noticed faint scabs on her knees, from when the Dark One had made her crawl. Her knees were dirty too, as dirty as her bare feet. With cold, soapless water, she did her best to wash everything.

Saving the filthiest part for last, Belle poured water over the cloth and set it between her legs. Her curls had clumped together down there, sticky and stiff from the dried fluids. Rumpelstiltskin had satisfied himself there twice, and Belle had found herself wet--how many times since her last wash? Three? More times in a row than she would have ever thought possible.

Belle lifted one leg to the bench so that she might be able to clean everything. She pressed the wet cloth between her legs and hissed at the contrast. Her feminine places were so hot and so tender that the sudden coldness felt like a physical pain. Belle closed her eyes and took a few shaking breaths. Then she began again.
“You always wanted to touch yourself at bath time.” The Dark One’s voice was soft, playful. Belle opened her eyes and saw him saunter over to her, the dungeon door swinging closed as he entered the cell. “Do I recall correctly?”

Belle bit her lip and nodded. How strange it was, to hear her words in his mouth, to hear her private confession repeated back to her so casually.

Slowly, Belle removed the cloth from between her legs, and stepped off the bench to stand with both feet on the floor. She kept her eyes downcast, as though washing were something to be ashamed of.

“Oh don’t stop on my account.” He wasn’t wearing his coat today, just a leather waistcoat and breeches with a red silk shirt. His boots today were brown, the leather soft with wear.

The Dark One bent at the waist to pick the water cup off of the ground. His gaze shifted from the cup to Belle, to the rag in her hand, and her shivering, naked body. He tilted his head, making the connections. “What a clever thing you are,” he said lightly. He set the cup down again and reached out to her. “But let me help you.”

He took her by the wrist, wrapping his fingers around the cuff. Standing behind her, he held the hand that held the cloth and Belle felt the heat transfer from his body to hers. The rag grew warm in her hand, hot as a proper bath, wet and comforting.

Pressing his torso against her back, Rumpelstiltskin moved her wrist and made her rub the cloth over her secret places. He pushed her in and out of herself, in a steady rhythm that entranced Belle and made her moan. His body was so close to her, so warm and so solid. She wanted to cling to him, wanted to open herself to him, wanted to invite him inside her, to beg him to pin her down and fill her up and put an end to this yearning, this sudden need he had created inside her.

A noise escaped her throat, a high-pitched whine that ended in a gasp when Rumpelstiltskin slid away from her. He pulled her hand away from her body, taking the rag with him before he let her go. Belle could feel her face flush, feel herself panting and staring at the Dark One in glassy-eyed confusion.

“Breakfast?” he offered, too loud and too bright, acting as though he hadn’t just been two touches away from making her orgasm.

He was teasing her, Belle thought as the blood slowly retreated from her cheeks. He was taunting her with the prospect of pleasure. At least he seemed happy about it. That was better than those times when giving himself pleasure made him turn cold and distant.

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” she answered, blinking out of her daze. “Breakfast would be lovely.”

“Then get on the floor,” he ordered, “and crawl on your belly to me.”

“Wait!” Belle protested, but the cuffs had already pulled her to the ground. The dungeon floor was filthy and they made her crawl in the dirt, pressing her body into the grimy stone. Everything had changed so suddenly. He had been pleasuring her and now he was humiliating her again! Belle ground her teeth as she crawled, fought to keep herself from shouting or crying. She didn’t know which she would prefer.

The Dark One stood in front of a tray on the floor, blocking her path to the food. He waited for her to finish crawling from one end of the cell to the next. The cuffs pulled her arms and dragged her legs behind her. As she glared up at him, she saw him watching her. He licked his lips.

“Kiss my boots before you get started, dearie. Thank me for being so very kind to such a lowly
Trembling with rage, Belle placed one kiss on one boot. Then she opened her mouth and forced the words out: “Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin. You are very kind.”

The Dark One laughed out loud and bent down to cup her chin in his hand. “You need to get better at lying to me, dearie.”

“I don’t like to lie.” She pulled herself away and he let her go. He straightened up and stepped backwards over the tray of food.

“But you do it anyway, like a good lady should, especially when lying means saving your lovely skin.”

Belle had nothing to say to that. “May I eat, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“Do you think you deserve to eat, little whore? Have you earned that privilege yet?”

“I--” Belle stammered. How was she supposed to justify her body’s needs? What did he expect her to say? “I need to, Rumpelstiltskin. I must eat. Even just to have the energy to serve you properly.”

“I don’t know about that,” he rocked on his heels. “Hunger can be an excellent motivator. And there’s an awful lot I can do to you, even as I let you waste away and starve to death.” His voice was full of malice, but also full of glee. For the first time, Belle wondered if the Dark One would ever kill her, or let her come to death for his own amusement. The power he had over her was so complete, so absolute. He could do anything he wanted to her. Anything.

“Please let me eat, Rumpelstiltskin!” Fear leapt raggedly out of Belle’s throat, adding a cracked shriek to her plea.

He seemed to like it. She heard him chuckle and he kicked the tray over to her. Creamy porridge sloshed in a bowl, and a goblet splashed wine over the tray so it dripped into a bowl of fried apples.

“Thank you,” Belle whispered sincerely. He wouldn’t kill her today. Whatever else might happen, he wouldn't start starving her today.

“Keep your hands behind your back.” he ordered before Belle could even reach for a spoon. There was a spoon right there on the tray, but she couldn’t get to it!

The cuffs lifted her wrists off the floor and pulled her hands behind her. They settled on the small of her back, just above her bottom, one cuff on top of the other. Then they locked to each other, just as securely as they locked to the wall or to the floor. Lifted up as she was, Belle could balance on her knees. She could kneel before him even with her hands bound behind her.

But the tray was on the ground. She couldn’t reach it if she stayed upright. When she bent at the waist, locks of her hair dangled into the porridge and the apples. When she straightened up to shake her hair back, the motion made her lose all balance and she fell headlong into her breakfast.

She wasn’t hurt. Twisting her body as she fell, Belle landed on her side instead of her face. It was a low fall, a slow fall, and she took the impact on her arm. But her head had turned with the rest of her and one side of her face and hair landed in the porridge.

She couldn’t get up. She was stuck, lying on top of her breakfast, warm milk and oats soaking into her skin.
“Ugh!” Belle groaned, unable to contain her misery.

“Mm!” The Dark One answered, a happy little noise.

Belle opened one eye and saw him crouching in front of the tray, watching her trials with a merry fascination.

“Does this pleasure you?” she asked him bitterly

“Of course it does,” he smiled at her. “You’re adorable!”

She closed her eyes against the heat of tears. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. Not now. Not over something as stupid as this.

“Will you help me, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“No, dearie,” he said in a cruel parody of gentleness. “You can figure it out on your own.”

“I hate this,” Belle hissed as she wiggled her shoulders to push herself off her side.

“I know!” The Dark One cackled.

Lying on her belly again, Belle was as filthy as the dungeon floor. She could feel the dampness getting into her skin, ruining her like it had ruined her petticoat. Porridge was in her hair and on her face. She blinked several times to clear the goop out of her eye. A glob of the hateful stuff ran down her cheek and plopped to the ground.

And throughout all her ordeal, the Dark One was looking at her. His black and gold eyes gleamed with merriment, as though she were a show for his amusement. Yes, she was just a jester to him, a sad clown with pie on her face.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked brightly. “Eat up!”

Belle breathed. Eyes closed, she took deep breaths and waited for the fear and the anger and the indignation to subside. She breathed until she felt the firm foundation of determination, grim though it may have been. By the time she opened her eyes, she had filled herself with a resolution: No matter the cost, no matter the pain, she would eat breakfast.

Slowly, she creeped up on her belly to reach the tray. Nudging the bowl of fried apples over to her with her nose, Belle stuck out her tongue and sucked the fruit into her mouth. She glanced at the Dark One and his eyes were focused on her, serious and fascinated.

The food was good, just as the soup had been at her last meal. At least the Dark One could conjure up quality. The apple slices were soft and sweet, cooked in their own juices and seasoned with costly spices. When she lapped up the wine, it was cool in her throat, refreshing and lovely. Even the porridge, her nemesis, was drenched in cream and studded with nuts and dried fruits. She felt better for having eaten, even if getting to that point had been miserable.

When she was done, she sat up on her knees again. She forced herself to look at the Dark One. He was still crouched, balancing himself on his toes with his knees bent. They were the same height this way. He could see her eyes as well as she could see his. Belle hoped her expression was as steely as she felt.

“And now?” she asked, even as she hated to think of the answer.
“You didn’t wash your hair this morning.”

Belle blinked, breaking her gaze with the Dark One. What kind of a thing was that to say? What did he care when she washed her hair?

“It hardly seems to matter,” she said coldly. “It seems there was no point in washing at all, you just made me filthy all over again.”

“Well, no one ever admires whores for their cleanliness.” He stood up and clapped his hands together. “’Filthy whore’ is the usual term. Filthy whore, filthy liar, dirty deeds and unclean thoughts. Bathing isn’t in any part of your job description!”

Belle clenched her jaw. “Am I supposed to apologize for wanting to be clean?”

“No, no, no.” The Dark One danced his way around the cell. “Though this could be a good lesson in you telling me what you want.”

“I told you I wanted to eat and that didn’t exactly work out.”

“Oh?” he paused, mid-step. “Did I not provide for you? Are you still hungry?”

Belle opened her mouth and then shut it again. He was right. He had given her what she had asked for, even if he had made her take it on his terms. She wasn’t hungry anymore. She shook her head, half her hair weighed down with cooling porridge.

“So you did get to eat after all?”

That wasn’t the point! “Rumpelstiltskin--” Belle began, but he cut her off with a firm hand around her throat.

“That tone was very close to whining, dearie,” his voice was somewhere between a growl and a hiss. “I can tolerate a great deal of impertinence from a whore, but whining gets on my nerves. You sound like those stupid people I deal with who think they can get something for nothing. But you are not stupid, so you will not whine. Do you understand?”

Fine. Belle nodded, and porridge dripped from her face onto his hand. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Good,” he said and let her go. When he saw the glob of creamy whiteness she had shed, the Dark One raised his hand to his mouth and sucked the morsel off his skin.

Then he looked at Belle and licked his lips.

With one finger, he tilted her chin up, raising her head up to him. Then he bent at the waist and kissed Belle, gently, on her open mouth.

She let him kiss her, let him keep one hand on her throat and cover her mouth with his. She even allowed him to slide his tongue between her lips. After all, his cock had been there last night, why should his tongue upset her now?

Eyes closed, Belle allowed the Dark One to have his way with her body. He moved her neck to the side, exposing the dirty half of her face. His tongue moved, slippery and insistent, in and out of her mouth.

Slowly, Belle became aware of how he was moving away from her mouth. He was still kissing her, but kissing her jaw and her cheek and her temple. They were wet kisses, possessive. More than once
his jagged teeth scraped across her skin. Then Belle felt a slobbery swipe across her chin and she realized: The Dark One was licking her.

He stayed on the side of her face that had been covered in porridge. He licked up the residue of milk and oats, smacking his lips and making pleased noises.

Did he realize he was cleaning her? Did he know that this was what she wanted, even if not in this way? Of course he did. He knew he was giving her what she wanted. He was just making her take it on his terms.

Belle opened her eyes and let tears seep out. Why was she crying? How could she be sad now? How was it that an act of kindness had broken her more easily that cruelty ever could?

Still with his face pressed against her skin, Rumpelstiltskin stuck out his tongue and licked up Belle’s tears.

He paused for a moment, and Belle breathed as deeply as she could. He stayed close to her, too close for her to see his face. But his nearness was a comfort, and she could hear him breathing with her.

“Do you want more?” he murmured.

“More what?” Belle asked.

In answer, Belle felt a hot, wet cloth applied to the side of her face. The smell of lavender filled the air, and Belle realised that Rumpelstiltskin was rubbing her with the rag he’d taken earlier. He was washing her.

“Yes,” Belle whispered. “Yes, please, Rumpelstiltskin.” She closed her eyes and surrendered to his ministrations, trusting him to treat her well.

He did. He washed her face and neck, covering her with soap and hot water. It was so much better than what Belle had been able to do for herself. It was better than any bath she’d ever had. When she opened her eyes, she saw that the rag steamed with hot water and bubbled with lavender soap.

He had rolled up his sleeves to the elbow. The skin of his arms was the same dappled green of his face. Dots of brown and gold dusted over him the way freckles covered other men. She could see the tone of muscles there, lean and sinewy. There was something fascinating about having even this small part of him exposed. When would she see more of his body?

“Lift up your hands, my dear,” he ordered. The cuffs broke the hold they had on each other and pulled Belle first to her feet and then to the tips of her toes as they locked into a fixed point in the air over her head. She hung there like a side of meat, while the Dark One continued to scrub her clean.

Suds trickled down Belle’s body, from her collarbone to between her breasts to her waist. His hands on her were firm, but not demanding, not now. The hot water warmed Belle up entirely, filling her inside and out with a feeling of comfort and peace.

He worked his way down, rubbing her abdomen, washing away the dirt she’d gathered when he’d made her crawl to him. He wiped away the grime from her legs and knees, cleaned up the messes he had made between her legs. He washed away all the hurt and humiliation he had caused. He never had to stop and refresh the cloth. It was always hot, always soapy, always soothing and lovely.

He even made her extend her legs and washed in between her toes. Belle had never felt so pampered in her life.
“Don’t touch the ground,” he ordered and he pushed her body over to the bench. The cuffs kept her upright, holding her above the floor while he lead her along.

He sat on the bench, underneath Belle’s hanging gown and robe, and guided her down to him. He had her lie flat across the bench, with her head in his lap. She looked up at him, and even upside-down, she could see the quirk of his grin.

“Do I please you, Rumpelstiltskin?” He wanted this, surely. The Dark One wouldn’t do anything he didn’t want to do. He wanted to comfort her, to please her, to give her what she wanted.

“You will,” he answered. And then Belle remembered the other side of the Dark One’s coin: it all comes with a price. Right now he was giving her something, but he would make her pay for it later.

She heard the sound of water pouring and felt the heat on her scalp. His hands were in her hair now, coating her untamable tangles with more lavender soap. She tensed as his fingers combed through her curls, waiting for the agony that always came whenever anyone touched her hair.

But the pain didn’t come. It didn’t hurt at all to have Rumpelstiltskin touch her. What magic was he using to spare her that?

The sound of water again and he rinsed the soap off her hair and body. Belle sighed and closed her eyes, letting her fears and troubles flow away with the water.

“Would you like a little more pampering, my dear?”

Belle rubbed her face, felt her own cleanliness under her fingers. “What else is there for you to do?”

“Quite a lot, actually.” His voice was calm and his fingers ran through her hair gently. “I knew a sultan once who gave his wives a full year of beauty treatments before he allowed them into his bed.”

“A year?” Belle opened her eyes.

“Six months of oils and six months of perfumes.”

“I imagine that would get boring.”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. “Perhaps not, for a beautiful woman in a harem full of other beautiful women. I’m sure the wives found ways to amuse themselves. Would you like a taste of that treatment?”

“If you want to, Rumpelstiltskin.”

Her head was still in his lap, so he had to bend down to kiss her forehead. “Good girl.”

He kept his hands in her hair, rubbing through the tangles. Slowly, Belle became aware of a new fragrance added to the lavender.

“What is that?” she asked him.

“Oil of roses,” he said. “Have you never put oil in your hair to keep it smooth?”

She shook her head softly. “We had a tonic my cousin swore by, but it never helped me.” Jeanne used to spend hours wrangling Belle’s hair into something manageable, trying to contain her wild tresses in hats or hair pins. Was it really so simple as rubbing it with oil? Why had none of them known about that?
She tried to see what he was doing, where the oil was coming from. Had he summoned a bottle of the stuff? He never paused as he rubbed her hair, never stopped to get more. The oil was just there, as the water had been, in exactly the amounts he wanted.

Rumpelstiltskin was so gentle with her hair, she almost didn’t feel him touching her at all. Then the nature of his touches changed and Belle realized he was brushing her hair properly. But it was still so smooth and soothing. When she looked up at him, she saw that he had a wide-toothed comb in his hand. Jeanne had always used a horsehair brush and it had always hurt.

But this was perfect.

His hands rubbed oil into her temples and down her jaw, covering her in the lovely fragrance and softening her skin as he went.

“Sit up, my sweet,” he ordered gently, and the cuffs pulled her into position. They didn’t lock her in to place, however. Her hands swung freely as Rumpelstiltskin held her against his body and rubbed oil into her chest.

Belle leaned back into his embrace, letting her bare skin melt into his leathers.

He was able to reach down her legs and to her feet, cupping her soles in his hands. When she was covered in oil, he trailed his fingers back up her legs to rest over her secret places.

Even that slight touch made her jump and Rumpelstiltskin chuckled deep in his throat. “Do you think you’re ready for me?” he murmured into her ear. “Are you wet for me, Belle?”

“I can’t see how I wouldn’t be,” she answered.

“Let’s find out.”

As soon as he put his fingers inside her, Belle’s breath began to shake. Close as she was to him, she could hear Rumpelstiltskin’s pleased noises. He spread her wetness around her folds and held her close when she tried to jerk away. With the arm that held her over her chest he also grabbed her breast, rubbing her nipple with oil until it was hard and red. His other hand stayed inside her, rubbing her slick heat until she moaned.

The pleasure mounted higher and higher. Belle wanted nothing more than to curl up around Rumpelstiltskin’s hand, the way she curled up around herself at night. But he held her back against him. He forced her to stay still, to feel this pleasure in her body and give it no outlet but the one he wanted.

She orgasmed. Throbbing and clenching her thighs against his hand, panting and shuddering at the shock, her pleasure reached its height then began to ebb.

Rumpelstiltskin gave her a moment to breathe. Then he said, “Where was I?” and started rubbing the oil over her again.

He started with her back this time, bending her forward to coat her shoulders. Belle was happy to slump over, happy to make herself pliant and malleable. She still felt her pleasure between her legs, felt the echoes of her orgasm with every heartbeat. It was hard to judge, but it felt like that one was more intense than any of the others she’d had recently.

Her head felt strangely fuzzy, as though she’d had an overabundance of wine. It was a pleasant feeling, a soft comfort after the sharp, jerking madness. She could still feel the heat between her legs. She felt it even more than she felt Rumpelstiltskin’s hands on her back.
“You still look innocent, from back here,” he said casually. “Your flesh is still untouched.”

Something about his words made Belle blink out of her haze. “But you intend to touch me?”

“Oh, obviously,” he tapped his fingers against her spine. “But more importantly, I intend to mark you. Mark your lovely skin as my property.”

Belle stiffened, her breath coming in sharp huffs. “That’s the hurting?”

“Yes, my whore,” the Dark One murmured. He pressed his lips to her bare back. “I will damage you irreparably, permanently, so that anyone who ever sees you will know what kind of girl you are. Now sit up on your knees.”

The cuffs lifted Belle up and locked in the air to hold her steady. She was shaking, but they would not let her falter. The Dark One’s fingers traced the column of her spine, rubbing oil down the small of her back.

He didn’t stop when he reached her bottom. He covered her flesh with oil and then reached around to gather up wetness from between Belle’s legs. She jerked forward at his touch but the cuffs still held her up. He chuckled.

“Will you tell me something, Belle?” he asked. “Will you tell me about your dark and terrible fantasies?”

Even though he was behind her, Belle still closed her eyes when she spoke. “What would you know of me?”

“Did it ever occur to you,” the Dark One used one hand to rub her privates and the other on her bottom, “in your wildest imagination,” his fingers slipped in and out of her cunt, spreading the wetness further back, “that a man would ever be interested,” suddenly Belle felt a new, terrible invasion, “in this?”

For a moment, Belle was too shocked to speak, too shocked to make any noise. Too shocked to even blink. She bit her lip against her first, instinctive retch and swallowed down her disgust in a gasp.

“Answer me,” the Dark One said in a sing-song voice while his finger pushed in to her asshole.

“No.” Belle heard her own voice, shaky but definite. “This never occurred to me.”

“No? Well, I suppose that would be too much to ask for. A maiden who thinks of getting fucked at all is a rarity, let alone a maiden who thinks of getting fucked in the arse.”

Belle winced, and clenched her jaw. This was too much. It was too strange, too foul, too personal. She couldn’t bear it. “Please!” she gasped.

“Am I hurting you, Belle?”

The sound of her name calmed her down a little. “No,” she admitted. “No, it doesn’t hurt, but it feels wrong.”

“Yes, that’s what makes it fun!” He pinched her nipple and Belle felt her whole body tighten. She clenched around his finger and the sound he made was obscene in its delight.

“Please,” she whispered. “I don’t like this.”

“Alright.” With his free hand, he rubbed her reassuringly. “You will have to bear it, but I won’t
make you suffer for long. Not today."

He took his arm away from her chest. Belle heard a sound behind her, a rapid, rhythmic, sloshing.

“Rumpelstiltskin?” she asked timidly. “What are you doing?”

“Covering my cock with oil,” he answered. “So I’ll slide into you easily.”

Oh. “Is this act… pleasurable? For you?”

He chuckled. “There are few things a man willingly puts his cock in that don’t feel pleasurable.”

Belle felt his breath against her ear. “And eventually, if I train you well enough, you’ll find it pleasurable too, my sweet whore, my perfect slut.”

Belle couldn’t imagine that. She closed her eyes and pressed her weight onto the cuffs. The magic would hold her wherever the Dark One wanted her to be.

He leaned her forward and she felt his hands opening her up. Slowly, he eased his cock into her ass and she heard his soft exhalations as he enjoyed the sensation. He pressed himself into her and Belle dug her nails into her palms.

How could she describe it? It was like when he had put his cock in her mouth last night--the strange invasion, the foreign object filling her and overtaking her, replacing whatever sense of control she had over her own body and making her a vessel of its will.

It was Rumpelstiltskin’s cock she thought of in that moment, not the man himself. In this state, she lost all sense of him, of a person who could be spoken to and reasoned with. Now, everything was about the cock in her body, the demands it required of her, the pleasure it needed to bring her ordeal to an end.

As when he went into her feminine places, he slowly slid in and out of her, over and over again. At first, he kept her bent over, but gradually he tilted her back onto his body. They were both sitting upright, Belle in his lap, him buried inside her most intimate place.

He used one hand to hold her close to him. He lifted her body up and down in a frenzied bounce. The faster he went, the closer the feeling came to pain. But by this time Belle knew that the faster he fucked her the closer he was to finishing. He would orgasm and then it would be over and that was all she wanted at that moment.

Grunts and obscenities filled the air. His grip on her grew ever tighter. His claws dug into her skin and with a final shout the Dark One poured his seed into Belle’s rectum.

“Oh,” Belle groaned. It was disgusting, hot and fluid. She felt like she had fouled herself, a feeling that only grew worse when he pulled his manhood out of her.

She wanted to run to the bucket, to hide her shameful body from him, to wash herself all over again. But his arms were around her, tight as any ropes. He pressed his face against her back and her hair and she could feel his body shaking behind her.

Belle’s own body shook in time with his. With every breath and every heartbeat, she quivered. Her whole being pulsed and throbbed in a way that was horrible in its familiarity. This was pleasure! He—he had pleasured her! By doing that! How was that even possible?

“I’ll leave soon,” Rumpelstiltskin’s voice behind her was dull and flat. “I will demand nothing more of you today.” The arms around her loosened, became an embrace and not a stranglehold.
Belle breathed and felt both their shakings subside. They breathed together, as he clung to her.

“Tell me,” he ordered in a whisper. “Tell me you hate me and would kill me if you could. Tell me you’re miserable here, that every moment is torture, and that I’m only a mad demon for thinking you get any pleasure out of this at all. Tell me you want to leave and never come back. Tell me how evil and twisted I am. Please, Belle, tell me the truth.”

Momentarily wordless, Belle shook her head. “I can’t,” she whispered. “I can’t say those things and also tell you the truth, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He made a noise, half a sigh, half a laugh. “And you won’t lie to me, not even once?”

“I’ll say what you order me to say, but that doesn’t mean it’s the truth.”

His forehead rested on her hair and Belle could feel his breath on the back of her neck. “This will get easier,” he promised. “You’ll get used to being used.”

“And you’ll get used to using me?”

He stood up quickly, sliding Belle off his lap and onto the bench. He stood before her, breeches laced, face composed, not a drop of water or oil on his clothes. His expression was blank as he looked down at her. After a moment, Belle realized how deliberate that blankness was.

“Keep the cloth,” he said briskly. “You’ll want to wash again.”

The rag he had enchanted still steamed and bubbled on the dungeon floor. Belle knew it would keep going forever, for as long as he wanted it to.

“Thank you,” she said. She tried to keep her tone light and friendly. She had insulted him without meaning to, and she wanted to make amends.

But he was already walking out of the cell. The door swung open at his wave. “Until next time, dearie!”

Then the door shut behind him with a thud.

Chapter End Notes

Sex Ed Time! Please do not use body oil as a lubricant! Baby oil dissolves condoms (which you should definitely use for real-life anal sex) and vegetable/olive oils can block pores and cause zits in uncomfortable places. Water-based lube like KY jelly is your friend! I also don't recommend using lube as a body lotion or hair conditioner.

Also, anal orgasms are a real thing. Try one today!

Thanks for reading.

[Edited to add: Apparently, KY Jelly is not that great, which is new information for me.]
So just... do your own research, never stop learning, and stay safe!}
“Wake up, girl! It’s morning!” The Dark One’s voice was bright and cheerful as he roused Belle out of sleep.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up on the bench that was her bed. He stood in the shadow of the dungeon door, dressed in his armor of scales and leather. He wore the shiny black boots today.

“Good morning,” Belle greeted him with a sleepy wave.

“Your hair is a mess,” he scolded, coming out of the shadows to get a better look at her. He tsked and his face contorted into a sneer. “And after I took such care with it!”

Belle reached up to her head and felt the familiar frizzy tangles. Her hair was always worst in the morning, especially if it hadn’t been braided before bedtime. “Sorry,” she looked up at him as he approached her. “My hair is pretty incorrigible.”

“It just needs better management.” He turned his hand and suddenly he held a comb, the same one he had used yesterday when he had washed her. “Lean forward.”

The cuffs pulled Belle to sit on the bench with her feet on the floor and her wrists bound to the wood behind her. Her back stretched out and she craned her neck so that the Dark One could have access to her head.

It didn’t hurt to have him tend her hair. Not as much as as when her cousin Jeanne had done it at home. Rumpelstiltskin started at the ends, combing his way up to her scalp. Firmly but not roughly, he pulled out her knots and smoothed her tight curls into waves.

Leaning forward as he had ordered, Belle kept her gaze on the ground. He was close enough that she could see her reflection in his shiny black boots. She looked at herself—or at least at the faceless thing the Dark One made her. She was bent over, restrained by magic, forced to submit to his will. His will was gentle now, and could be pleasurable at times, but how long would that last? How long would it be before his darker impulses took over him and became her master?

Except for the faint scraping of Belle’s hair in the comb, the cell was quiet. Normally a creature of chirps and noises, the Dark One was silent as he worked her over. It was strange to have him so close and yet so distant, so attentive and yet so remote.

“I can brush my hair myself, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle offered as an excuse to break the silence.

“No, dearie.” His voice was sing-song and Belle took comfort in the sound of it. “I don’t trust you with such a lovely commodity. It’s mine now.”

“My hair?”

“The tending of it. Don’t you ever pick up a brush or a comb for as long as you are my thing. Do
you understand?"

Belle felt the cuffs grow warm at his words. They would never forget his order. They would never allow her to brush her hair. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” she murmured. It was a bizarre order, but one it wouldn’t distress her to obey.

“Good!” With a final stroke he stepped back and admired his handiwork. “Much better! Now, take off your robe and follow me.”

The cuffs broke their hold on the bench and pulled Belle to her feet. One hand moved to untie the belt on her robe and the other bent awkwardly at the elbow to grab at the collar, pulling the garment off of her in the most uncomfortable way possible.

“I can do this myself too!” She snapped at the cuffs. Belle ripped the robe off her body as quickly as she could, denying the stupid cuffs their chance to force her into a display of obedience. With an irritated huff, she wadded the lovely robe into a ball and threw it on the bench. The day had just begun and she was already grinding her teeth.

But when she looked at the Dark One, he was just leaning in the doorway and grinning, Enjoying the show, like always.

Belle swallowed and looked down. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly.

“For?” the Dark One asked with eyebrows raised.

“For losing my temper. I know it’s not becoming.”

He snorted. “I think you have more temper in you than that little display. Perhaps someday I’ll provoke you into real anger. Perhaps someday you’ll provoke me, though that would be a bad day for everyone. For the moment,” he inclined his head and walked out the door, “come along.”

The cuffs pulled her forward, but not down. Wasn’t he going to make her crawl today? Her wrists led the rest of her body, chasing the Dark One as he sauntered through the castle.

He led her to the dining room. Even on this lovely morning, the curtains were drawn and the only light came from the fire in the hearth. The food tray was in the center of the carpet in front of the fireplace. Belle saw a mutton chop and a pile of mashed turnips on a plate— but no silverware.

“Kneel,” the Dark One ordered casually as he flopped into his armchair by the fire.

The cuffs pulled her forward, but not down. Wasn’t he going to make her crawl today? Her wrists led the rest of her body, chasing the Dark One as he sauntered through the castle.

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“Kneel,” the Dark One ordered casually as he flopped into his armchair by the fire.

The cuffs pulled Belle to the carpet, locking her with the tray under her nose. Smelling the food made her stomach grumble. But she kept her eyes on the Dark One. She waited for his permission to bend over and slop up her meal like a dog.

The Dark One leaned sideways in his chair, his elbow on resting on the padded arm, his chin resting on his knuckles. He looked over, his brow furrowed. He didn’t meet her gaze, but looked up and down her body—not lavaciously, but as though she were a puzzle he wanted to solve.

“I’m going to try something,” he informed her. “You’d do well not make me regret it.”

Belle felt her own brow furrow. What was he going to try? Would it hurt? “I—I’ll do my best,” she said.

From his chair, he lifted one finger and swooped it in a magical motion. Instantly, Belle felt the cuffs unlock, releasing her from the floor. She lifted her hands up, absurdly amazed to have her body
under her own power.

Rumpelstiltskin’s expression had not changed. He looked at her casually, dismissively. As though her comfort was nothing at all to him. As though he had done nothing for her.

“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle smiled up at him.

He waved her off and looked away. “You may eat, if you wish.”

But there was something Belle had to do first. He had to know what it meant to her, to have even a little freedom. He had to know that she was grateful to him, truly grateful. He wouldn’t believe her words, so she had to show him.

On her hands and knees, Belle crawled around her breakfast to kiss Rumpelstiltskin’s boots.

As soon as Belle put her lips to the leather, his whole body went stiff. From her place on the ground, she heard his sharp intake of breath. If she didn’t know better she would have called it a gasp. His posture stayed rigid and tense for the first few kisses. But he eventually relaxed, as she kissed him over and over, moving from one boot to the other. Of her own will, Belle grovelled on the floor and gave Rumpelstiltskin her honest, heartfelt thanks.

“Alright, you’re welcome!” he said at last, lifting his feet up over her head. “Now, will you eat, woman?”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle kept her head bowed as she crawled. She let her hair hang over her face so he wouldn’t see her grinning.

She went back to her food, to the meat and turnips on the tray. It didn’t really surprise her to see that on the day she was allowed to use her hands the Dark One had conveniently forgotten to provide her with a knife and fork. But she had handled worse than that.

Before she began, Belle pulled her hair behind her head, smoothing it down so it wouldn’t get dirty or in the way. Then she knelt on the ground in front of Rumpelstiltskin, and began to eat with her hands.

This was a different type of humiliation than before. This was trickier. She had more choices now than she did when she was locked to the floor or with her hands behind her back. But she knew that the result would be the same.

The plate holding the mutton was affixed to the tray, so she couldn’t bring it up to her. She had to hold the chop in both hands and tear into the meat with her teeth. It was a wild and savage action, the action of a lower animal. Not a dog, but a wolf. It gave Belle the oddest thrill, to feel powerful, even in her degradation. If she couldn’t be a lady, why not be a wild thing? If she had to be locked in a cage, why couldn’t she act like a savage creature? Why not? If it pleased Rumpelstiltskin and cost her nothing--why not?

With that mindset, she didn’t even mind scooping up the mashed turnips in her hand and licking the mush off her fingers. She didn’t make a mess, she wasn’t that much of an animal yet, but she licked herself clean and crawled back over to Rumpelstiltskin when she was finished.

“Did you like that?” his voice was low. He brushed her hair and it felt like he was petting her.

“I did,” Belle leaned in slightly, closer to his touch.

“Good.” He stood up and went to the dining room table. “Then that shall be a treat for you! When
you’re good, I shall permit you to eat with your hands.”

“And when I’m bad?” In the heat of the moment Belle had no fear alluding to punishments. She crawled over to him, allowing her hips to sway. Was that alluring to him? Would he want her to do that?

The Dark One chuckled. “Oh, I’ll learn you yet, dearie. Whatever you hate the most is how I’ll punish you.”

She had already hated so many of the things he’d done to her. Whatever she hated most…

“Perhaps I should be good then.” Belle sank to her heels and kept her eyes downcast. She couldn’t say if she feared punishments or just hated the thought of him having to punish her. She wanted to be good, wanted to please him and make him happy with her. She hadn’t seen the Dark One’s wrath yet, but already it troubled her less than facing his disappointment.

“Obedience will protect you from punishment, but not from harm. There is a distinction, my dear.” He grinned at her, showing off his rotted teeth. “Do you remember how I take my tea?”

“Three sugars and cream,” she answered promptly, like a good student.

“Clever girl. Let’s see if you can make me a cup without breaking any crockery this time!”

The cuffs didn’t stop her from standing up and walking to the glass-fronted cabinet. When Belle pulled the tea tray out of the magic cupboard, she saw that the chipped cup was still a part of the set. She winced at her past self, at the foolish prudity that had made her drop the silly thing. He hadn’t punished her for breaking the cup, but it wasn’t any good anymore. Did the Dark One keep it just to shame her?

She fixed the tea and brought him the unchipped cup without incident. She stood at the side of the table, facing him, waiting for whatever would come next.

He took a sip and nodded. “Satisfactory,” he declared. He set the cup in its saucer and looked up at her. His expression was serious now, his voice soft and steady. “Belle,” he said. “I’m going to hurt you today.”

Her body tightened and she dug her nails into her palms to calm herself. The sharp pain centered her, and she was able to breathe. She had known this was coming. It would be better to face it now, better to know what harm he could do to her than to live anymore in fear. “As you wish, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“It won’t be much, not this first time. But I’ll probably make you cry.”

“You already have,” she blurted. Belle winced as soon as the words were out of her mouth, but she didn’t try to take them back. They were true words. He had given her many reasons to cry since she had come to the castle. But she had borne them all.

He blinked at her, then looked down. “So I have.” He picked up the teacup and held it in both hands. “Well, at least this time you have a warning.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.” He was right. At least now it would be no surprise if he suddenly turned vicious. But even knowing this, Belle’s heart still pounded.

“This is your task now, my girl: I want you to stand still.” He took a sip of tea. “One foot flat on the floor, and the other angled behind you on the ground, supported only by your pretty toes. I want you
to keep one hand behind your back and the other over your lovely chest, reaching up to your throat.
Yes, like that.” She was already moving herself into position. “You may keep your eyes lowered, but
try to smile a little. Yes,” his voice was a breath as he looked at her. “Lovely. Now I’m going to
drink my tea, and you’re going to try to stay still and keep track of every time you wobble. That is,”
he grinned, “every time you fail.”

It started off easy. She only had to stay still. She only had to look beautiful for him. But she was
standing on one foot and her hands were no use to help her balance. It would only be a matter of
time before she broke her position, before she--

“Wobble!” the Dark One called out, the second her knees began to shake. He had summoned a stack
of papers and was reading while he enjoyed his tea. He wasn’t even looking at her, but he had seen
her fail him.

“Sorry,” she said as she straightened herself up. “It won’t happen again.”

“Yes it will.”

He had told her to keep track of how many times she moved when he had told her to stay still. Belle
kept the number in the forefront of her mind, hoping against hope that the focus would settle her
body. If she kept her thoughts on the word One , then it would be impossible for her to think about
the itch between her shoulders or the stray hair tickling her ear or any of the dozen things that might
make her--

“Wobble!”

Twice then, twice she had failed. But that wasn’t too bad. Belle closed her eyes and tried to think of
nothing but the word Two . Maybe that would be enough to keep her still to keep her from--

“Wobble!”

Belle had to admire the craftiness of this game. This was the first time since she had gotten her cuffs
that he hadn’t used them to immobilize her. The first day she was able to move was the first day the
Dark One would punish her for moving. He was giving her freedom, but that meant certain failure.
No matter the outcome of this game, the Dark One had already won.

After a while, the Dark One pushed away his empty cup. “You may move,” he said. “And you may
take away the tea things.”

Like a puppet with cut strings, Belle slumped over, almost ready to collapse. It had been so much
harder to control herself than to let the cuffs bind her. But now she was permitted to relax. For a
moment, she closed her eyes—shutting the Dark One out of even her thoughts. She breathed. She
stretched her arms out and up over her head. She made herself aware of her muscles and joints and
bones and the fact that her body was moving how she wanted it to, even if only for a moment.

A moment was all she needed.

Opening her eyes again, Belle gathered the dishes and set the tea tray in the cupboard where she’d
found it. Magic cleaned the cups and maintained the hot water. Magic cared for all of
Rumpelstiltskin’s practical needs. His impractical needs were her responsibility.

He sat back in his chair with his boots on the table. “Tell me, girl, how many times did you wobble
when I had told you to be still?”

“Eight.” Belle stood as she had before the game, like a servant waiting in attendance. “I failed you
eight times, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Tut, tut, tut.” He shook his head. “Eight wobbles means twenty lashes.”

Belle’s mouth opened of its own accord. Twenty! “How does that add up?”

“It doesn’t!” he cackled. “Now, bend over onto the table.”

Belle found herself trembling as the cuffs made her obey. She stood with her feet flat on the floor and her arms outstretched against the smooth wood. She thought she had positioned herself well enough, but the cuffs pulled her forward until she was balanced on the tips of her toes. They locked into place when her rear was high in the air and her face was pressed onto the table’s varnished surface.

He was somewhere behind her. She could hear his graceful footsteps. She imagined him moving slowly to look at her from every angle. Did it please the Dark One, to see her in this posture? Did this humiliation enflame his desires?

“How is it down here?” he asked, putting his hand to her bottom and rubbing. “After our last adventure?”

“It… aches.” Her face blushed scarlet. “A little.”

He giggled. “It will get worse,” he whispered into one ear, his whole body suddenly pressing against Belle on the table. “I’ll make your arse wretched, inside and out.”

She bit her lip and nodded against the polished wood. “As you wish, Rumpelstiltskin.”

His footsteps danced in her ears, and Belle could imagine his glee. Surprisingly, it was a comfort to her. If he was happy with what he was doing to her, if she pleased him and was good for him—then everything was easier for her.

“And now, you naughty, wobbly thing, you must count!” A slap came down on her bottom. Belle yelped, more in surprise than pain. She would have jumped, but the cuffs held her down. “That was one. Say one.”

“One.”

Another slap, on the other cheek. “So that was…?”

“Two.”

“Good.” Slap.

“Three.”

“You’re getting it!” Slap.

“Four!” By now the surprise had worn off and a small glow of pain had started on her backside. It grew every time he hit her.

“Eight!” Belle counted, and she wondered what he was using to lash her. It felt solid, like a paddle or a hairbrush. Not a switch or a whip or a riding crop.

“Ten!”

“That was Nine, dearie. Where is your head?”
“Ten--again!”

Slap.

“Eleven!” More than halfway there. Assuming he would keep his word.

“Twelve!” He would keep his word. He would end at twenty.

“Thirteen!” And even if he didn’t, what difference would it make?

By Seventeen, Belle was crying from pain. But she still counted. They were so close to the end.

“Eighteen!” She couldn’t spoil it now.

“Nineteen!” He was quiet, Belle realized through her mental fog. Was something wrong?

“Twenty!” Out of habit, she braced herself for the next slap, but it didn’t come. Instead, she heard Rumpelstiltskin heave himself on to the table next to her. He sat up, looking down at her, and Belle could feel the air moving from his idly swinging legs. The air was cool on her heated bottom, even the touch of a soft breeze made her wince.

“So!” Rumpelstiltskin seemed jubilant, triumphant. “What did you think of all that?”

Belle smiled, and would have wiped away her tears but the cuffs held her hands down.

“You’re alright? These are tears of pain, not sorrow and rage?”

She nodded.

“Are you able to speak to me, Belle?”

“Yes,” her voice was softer than she meant it to be. What was wrong with her?

“Will you tell me how you feel?”

“It does hurt.” Words came to her slowly. It was like she had drunk too much wine. “But I can manage it. I don’t feel….” she had a thought of what she thought Rumpelstiltskin was afraid of her feeling but she didn’t know how to describe it, didn’t know what words to use to make him understand she didn’t feel that way, “sad.” It was the best word her mind could come up with.

“That’s good,” he said gently. “It’s good you’re not sad.”

“May I get up?”

“For a little while. I’ll want you on your back soon.”

The cuffs loosened their grip on the table and Belle pulled her arms close to her chest. With Rumpelstiltskin’s help she got her legs onto the table and lay on her side. She put herself next to him, with her head resting on his thigh, her legs curled up to her chest.

He was quite still, when she first lay on him. His legs abruptly stopped swinging. But after a few moments, he rested his hand on her head and began to stroke her hair. Belle took comfort in his touch, even when his hands wandered from her hair to her back to her bottom.

“I turned you a rosy pink today.”
“I felt it.” She had felt that pain as though it were the creation of the universe.

“And still you are undamaged? Still you’d stay here and continue this life?”

“We made a deal,” she said. Her wits were coming back to her. “I have to stay.”

He kept his hand on her backside, gripping the flesh tightly. But already the pain was fading. “Roses come in darker shades than this, my girl.”

“How dark?”

“Think of who you’re talking to, dearie.”

“So I’m no longer a creamy white rose,” she said. “You say I’m pink now? Light pink?”

“A shade darker than blushing.”

“So you would still make me bright pink?”

“That’s a certainty.”

“Bright red?”

“Yes.”

“Blood red?”

He paused before answering. “Eventually.”

Now it was Belle’s turn to pause, to summon up her courage before asking a difficult question. “Black and blue?”

Rumpelstiltskin raised her chin to look her in the eyes when he said, “When you can handle it, I will take great pleasure in bruising you.”

She met his gaze, though tears still burned in her eyes. “Would you break me?”

He rubbed her cheek with his thumb. “Nothing I didn’t know I could heal.”

She had to ask the next question. She would never have a better opportunity. “Rumpelstiltskin would you ever kill me?”

The silence before his answer frightened Belle more than anything had since the night the ogres had attacked her town.

“I used to kill… too often,” he said quietly. “If anyone inconvenienced me at all it was nothing to turn them into a snail and… crunch.” He lifted up his foot and Belle had the terrible image of a person made small and slow and helpless, that the last sight they ever saw was the Dark One’s boot coming down to crush them.

Her body tensed but she stayed on his thigh.

“But over the years I’ve realized that’s no way to do business. I prefer to intimidate, give annoying people enough of a fright to add to my legend. Even my enemies, if I can find a way to beat them and let them live knowing they’re beaten—that is a sweet taste. Yes, anymore I would rather fight to the pain than to the death.”
“And me?” The question wasn’t even a whisper, just a breath.

“You’re not my enemy, Belle. And if I ever find you annoying I can just order you to stop and I know you’ll obey me.”

“But will you kill me?”

“I won’t say ‘never’ because life is long and full of misery. Not even I can say for certain what the future holds. But I will tell you now that I did not save you from the ogres just to let you die with me.”

Belle sighed in relief. “Thank you,” she said. Now that she knew, it was easy to chuckle at her silly fears. “I knew it was foolish to worry that you would one day decide to just eat me.”

“Well…” Rumpelstiltskin said slyly. “As a matter of fact…”

She sat up. “What?”

He hopped off the table, his eyes gleaming. “Don’t be afraid, pretty Belle. I’m not going to hurt you. Not even a little this time. I told you I would want you on your back!”

“Are you going to eat me?”

“Yes!” he put his hands on her knees and looked her in the eyes. “But don’t be afraid.” He pushed her back with his own hands, only letting the cuffs take control when it was time to lock her in place again. “I am going to make a fine meal of you,” he announced grandly. “Why else do you think I put you on a table?”

Belle fought her instinct to struggle, tried desperately not to be afraid. He said he wouldn’t hurt her, said he wouldn’t kill her. She had to believe that. She had to take the Dark One at his word or she would begin to doubt the very foundation of their deal. He wouldn’t hurt her, but he would eat her. What kind of riddle was that?

Confusion reigned in Belle’s thoughts as she felt Rumpelstiltskin’s hands spreading apart her thighs. Shortly after, she felt his hot breath on her secret places. And then, the whole of his mouth on her, in the most intimate kiss she could have ever imagined.

Oh.

But instead of feeling pleased, Belle got angry. She tried to wrest her hips away from his hands, kicking as much as she dared. “Why would you frighten me like that?”

He stood up to hold her down. “I told you not to be afraid, little thing. Naughty of you to disobey me.”

“That isn’t fair!” she shouted. “How was I to know what you meant by eating?”

“I am not to blame for your lack of education, child. I’m doing my best to teach you what you need to know about life.”

“You could teach first and save the physical demonstration for later!”

“And I could refuse to speak to you and give you no answers at all!”

They faced each other, Belle pushing up from the table and Rumpelstiltskin leaning over her body. They stared at each other, both equally resolved not to let the other win.
Belle looked away first. With a resigned huff, she sank back onto the tabletop. He could do whatever he wanted to her. She was stupid for even pretending she could fight him.

When the Dark One spoke again, his voice was declarative, theatrical. “Now, I am the sort who enjoys surprising people with good things, it’s one of my fancies. But you don’t seem to like surprises and you want to know what I’m going to do before I do it. Is that what you want now?”

“I suppose,” Belle muttered. “Please don’t be angry.”

“I’m not angry, I’m stern.” He went on: “Now, dearie, I’m going to use my mouth on you, similar to the way I taught you to use it on me. I will use my lips and my tongue and my teeth to pleasure you for as long as it takes to get you to orgasm on my face. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

He looked at her. “Sorry for being afraid?”

“Sorry for not trusting you.”

He snorted and his voice became more ordinary. “You have no reason to trust me, Belle. The fact that I insist you do only emphasizes how powerless you are, how very much you are at my mercy. Fear is a natural reaction. But, hopefully, not the only reaction I can get out of you today.”

Then his hands were on her inner thighs again. His fingers parted her folds and his thumb felt along her lips for her most secret pleasure. He found it and Belle’s back arched as she gasped.

“Oh good,” his voice was calm. He kept his thumb near that spot, the way he might save a place in a book while looking through the other pages. His mouth was on Belle’s thigh, giving her a series of hot, wet kisses that stopped just short of reaching her privates. She wondered, inanely, whether he was bending over her or sitting on his knees.

When his mouth did meet her womanhood, she felt the shock of it through her entire body. He held her mound in his mouth and slowly ran his tongue over the spot his thumb had marked.

Belle moaned in pleasure and felt her hips rising off the table. Rumpelstiltskin stayed with her, rubbing the spot again and again.

Then he let go, broke away just far enough to breathe. Belle could hear him panting. He kept his forehead pressed against her curls and the pressure kept her close to the edge of pleasure.

After adjusting his position, he pressed his nose to the pleasure spot and used his mouth to lick at Belle’s folds. His tongue waggled energetically, but Belle was consumed by the sensations he brought forth from that secret spot.

Rumpelstiltskin broke away again, and Belle was grateful to have a chance to breathe. She was becoming used to this pattern, this wave of pleasure that ebbed as well as flowed. When he came back to her, his whole mouth was on her lower lips and his tongue was in the place where he normally put his cock. He darted in and out of her, his chin moving against her body in an echo of his tongue.

Another break, and then his lips wrapped around her pleasure spot in a complete circle of feeling. He sucked at her, and it was like the way she had sucked on him—except that Rumpelstiltskin was not forbidden to use his teeth.

He didn’t bite her, exactly, but his jagged teeth grazed against her soft flesh. The heady mingling of
pain and pleasure finally pushed Belle over the edge. Her body rose and rose and were it not for the cuffs she might have crawled backwards off the table in her frenzy. Rumpelstiltskin moved with her as she rose. His head pushed into her, giving her no escape from her own ecstasy.

She screamed and moaned and collapsed onto the table, breathless and boneless. Her world had shrunk until there was nothing but herself, nothing but the blood pulsing between her legs and pounding in her ears. In that moment, she had even forgotten Rumpelstiltskin, until she felt his weight on top of her.

He was inside her, without preamble. Her parts were still throbbing from his mouth when she felt his cock. Could he feel the after-effects of her orgasm? Did that make it better for him? She was more slippery than she had ever been before. He grabbed hold of the cuffs to hold on and stay inside her.

He kissed her, and she tasted her own wetness on his lips. Her cunt tasted like it smelled, briny and pungent. She could smell herself covering his chin and mouth. And now the same scent would cover his manhood, and perhaps his own smells would linger on her body as well. The thought of that made her hips jerk up into him.

“Did I taste good, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“You are delicious, my sweet.”

Her pleasure had left her almost insensible. Was that why he was rougher with her now than he had been before? Or had hurting her aroused his passions? Did he want to hurt her now? Was he trying to? He could. In that moment, Belle would have allowed him anything, anything he wanted to take from her.

As Rumpelstiltskin thrashed and thrusted, Belle felt her body rising again. It felt so good to have him inside her, to feel him on top of her, to know that he was taking pleasure in her. She tried moving with him, rolling her hips back as he pushed forward. His groan let her know that was right. It felt so good she clenched her inner muscles around his cock. Rumpelstiltskin cried out at that and the sound was so gratifying that Belle clenched around him again.

He started going faster and Belle wanted nothing more than to match him. The exertion and the pleasure made her grunt and groan, and for every noise she made he echoed her.

“Belle,” he panted. “I want to use magic on you.”

“Why?”

“To make you come. You won’t need much at this rate.”

She couldn’t think. “What does come mean?”

“Orgasm. *Fuck!* I want you to orgasm before I do.”

“Again? Can I do it twice?”

“You already are!” he snarled. “But magic will make it happen sooner.”

“Do I have to say yes before you can use magic on me?”

“Say yes now or I’ll never let you come again!”

“Yes!” she cried. She felt a supernatural jolt at the place where their bodies joined. It was a spark of
heat and power that entered her and filled her and pleasured her from the inside out. “Oh, yes!”

“Yes.” He answered her pleasure with his pleasure, her frenzy with his frenzy.

Belle felt the magic bloom inside her, growing larger and stronger with every one of Rumpelstiltskin’s thrusts. The pleasure overtook her, seizing her body inch by inch until she gave herself over to it entirely.

Rumpelstiltskin was hard inside her, demanding and ferocious and wild. He took her as he had never taken her before and her body matched him, wanted him. Oh, she wanted him to fuck her forever.

“Come for me, Belle,” he rasped, his breath hot on her face.

At his words, everything tightened in a glorious moment of confusing ecstasy. The magic inside Belle squeezed and the cock inside her spurted and the pleasure inside her came racing out. Rumpelstiltskin shouted and she echoed him, both of them bursting at the same time.

The lay together, on the table in the dining room. Belle was certain now that she had no bones in her body at all. Rumpelstiltskin lay on top of her, his neck pressed against her cheek. He was so close she could feel his pulse racing in his throat. His perspiration was damp against her skin and he was panting like he’d just run for miles.

He had given her a new word today, ‘coming.’ It felt right. She had been trying to get to a place, a state of being, and now she was there. She had come to the state of having had two orgasms in quick succession. She had come to the state of being naked and sticky and exhausted. She had come to a state she did not want to leave.

Rumpelstiltskin released her cuffs and took her in his arms. He rolled them both onto their sides so they faced each other. They were still close, still tangled up in each other. The only thing that separated them was Rumpelstiltskin’s clothing. Belle pressed her skin against his leather and silk.

He didn’t speak. He was still breathing heavily even after Belle had recovered. Rumpelstiltskin didn’t touch her, didn’t caress her body, but his fist clutched around a hank of her hair. He didn’t pull and it didn’t hurt, but she could feel him gripping it, rubbing his fingers over the curls.

He had never stayed with her this long afterward. That first night he had collapsed on her for just a moment, and every time since then he had sent her away or left. But now he lay with her on the table, his body every bit as exhausted as hers. Perhaps his mind was at peace like hers.

Belle raised her hand to rub his shoulder. “How are you?”

The touch seemed to startle him. He pulled away from Belle suddenly, sitting up on the table’s edge. But he still didn’t leave. He looked over at her, and his expression was pained. “Fine,” he said quickly. “I’m fine.”

“You seem… tired?” What other word could she use to describe the exhaustion she saw in him?

“Magic,” he shook his head. “It always comes at a price.”

“This is because of what you did to me?”

He nodded, his eyes closed. He reminded Belle of a man who had drunken himself into oblivion and was now waking up with a hangover.

“You said it wouldn’t be much.”
“It wasn’t. But, combined with everything else…” he waved his hand as if that explained everything. “Magic is a lender that collects with interest.”

Belle pulled herself up to a sitting position. “Can I be of help to you?”

He laughed at that, a mirthless sound, different from his usual amusement. “I’ll be fine, girl. All you need to do is find your way back to your cell and sleep heavily. I don’t imagine I’ll be wanting you tomorrow.”

“Very well,” Belle got up off the table and the cuffs pulled her back to the dungeon. They were more gentle now, as they tugged at her wrists instead of yanking her. “Good night!” she called, but he said nothing.
The Castle

Chapter Summary

Belle goes exploring

After the cuffs had pulled Belle from the dining room, through the halls, and back down to her cell in the dungeons, they released their hold on her. The heavy wooden door shut behind her and Belle indulged in a long, deep breath. She stretched her arms and shook her hands and enjoyed the freedom of being able to move however she wanted. Autonomy was a novelty now, a treat. A gift Rumpelstiltskin could give or take away as he liked.

There was a little daylight left, the days getting shorter as winter approached. In the pink glow of sunset, Belle found the wash rag that Rumpelstiltskin had enchanted to steam forever with hot water and lavender soap.

She brought the rag up to her face, letting the warmth of it cover her. Such a marvelous thing his magic had given her. Belle thought about that as she washed her body. Since she had arrived in his castle, Rumpelstiltskin had given her much by the use of magic: the pillow he had pulled out of the air, the cup that never emptied, the waste bucket that never filled.

And the robe she pulled over her shoulders, he had presented that to her with a magical display. Belle wrapped the blue and gold silk around her. It was such a lovely thing. Even if it wasn’t magical, it still had to be costly.

But wasn’t magic the costliest thing of all? That’s what he said, that all magic comes at a price. She understood that her submission to the Dark One was the price of him saving her people from the ogres. But what was the price of everything else? Who paid for the little comforts he gave her?

When Rumpelstiltskin had pleasured her with magic, he had paid that price himself. Surely that was the reason for his exhaustion after their coupling. That had to be why he had lingered on the table with her instead of bolting away as he usually did.

It had been pleasant for her to have him close afterward. But if using magic in that way had weakened him, then how could it be worth the price?

Belle’s body felt strangely alive and awake as she thought of the specific magic he had used to make her orgasm. The magic wasn’t so different from how he used his hands or his mouth to ensure the same reaction. But when he had been on top of her--and inside her, pounding into her like a raging animal--he hadn’t been able to use his hands or his mouth. Magic had been another part of him that he could use to please her. It was an extension of his body. Or perhaps an extension of his will.

Like the cuffs. Belle sat on her bench and looked at them, twisting her wrists so they caught the last glimmers of light before nightfall. The cuffs worked his will on her more than his own body did. He could control them, and her, with a just word or a wave or a nod of his head. And yet she had seen him make them out of straw. It was only magic that made them what they were, only magic and a deal that gave these upjumped stalks control over her body. What was the cost of that transformation? Who paid the price for the power they had over her?
It was dark now, and Belle could think of nothing else to do except sleep. She fluffed her pillow and lay down on the bench with her robe on and her legs spread.

Rumpelstiltskin’s order was that she touch herself every night before she slept. Tonight, after two orgasms, Belle didn’t know if she would be able to obey. Her flesh was sore and tender, too swollen and too sensitive to touch. When she brushed a finger against her pleasure spot, it sent out a shock of feeling that was too intense to be enjoyable.

But she had to obey, she told herself. He would punish her if she didn’t. He had punished her today. It hadn’t been much, but she knew he wanted to do more. Twenty hits to her backside had only been an introduction, an initiation to the world she would inhabit for the rest of her life.

What else would he do to her? Belle rested one hand over the curls between her legs and the other over her breast. He would beat her, surely. He said he would love to bruise her. It would pleasure the Dark One to fill her body with pain, to mutilate her flesh, to make her cry, make her scream and bleed and then fuck her until he came, shouting and bursting inside her.

A shiver went up her spine and Belle rubbed her breast to soothe herself. She knew that there were men who beat their wives. Society pretended that it only happened with commoners or drunken brutes, not our sort of people at all. But Belle had studied her father’s book of laws and she knew: If a wife disobeyed her husband’s word, any landowning man was permitted to correct her using whatever force he deemed right.

But Belle had never disobeyed the Dark One. He wasn’t trying to correct her misbehavior. He had intentionally set up an impossible task just as an excuse to hurt her. Because he liked it.

Did ordinary men like it? Did husbands beat their wives because they thought it was fun? Could Belle have been called upon to marry such a man? Gaston was a man of violence. It would not have surprised her to find that he was the sort to end an argument with his fists—even an argument with a woman. But Belle could not quite imagine him laying her out naked on a table and striking her bottom just for the pleasure of doing so.

Of course, Belle couldn’t really imagine Gaston taking pleasure in anything. He had never shown an interest in her, or in any activity that wasn’t fighting. What if--Belle pinched at her nipple and ran her hands over her curls--what if she offered to suck his cock? Nevermind how she would have that knowledge and still be acceptable as his wife, what if she did? Would that get his attention? Would he let her do it? He would never think of such an act on his own. Would it amaze him, to know that such a thing was possible? Would he let her teach him what she had learned from the Dark One?

Her flesh was still hot and wet but it no longer hurt to touch herself. She had to rub with more vigor than usual to feel the same effects.

What else could she tell the man she had been meant to marry? She didn’t desire Gaston, but the idea of shocking him—of educating him—was pleasant in her mind. After she had given him her mouth, perhaps she could persuade him to return the favor. It was ludicrous to think of Gaston bent over her, lapping and licking at her secret places for no other reason than to give her pleasure. Still, she imagined teaching him, encouraging him to explore and experiment, to open his mind to new possibilities. If she could learn, so could he.

The thought came unbidden, of Rumpelstiltskin looming over Gaston’s shoulder while he tried and failed to pleasure her. Belle gave out a soft chuckle as she imagined the Dark One correcting the boy’s technique, chiding Gaston and instructing him in a way he had to listen to.

What if she offered him her ass? Would Gaston listen to her as she told him what Rumpelstiltskin
had done there? Would such an act interest him? Or would he be horrified to know that Belle hadn’t minded it, that she had liked doing it and wanted to try it again? Would an ordinary man want to put his cock in a woman’s filthiest place? Would looking at her bottom and grabbing her breasts from behind be enough to satisfy him?

At the thought of Gaston’s satisfaction, Belle stilled her hand. It was the oddest thing, but she didn’t want him to orgasm in this fantasy. This wasn’t about his pleasure. Even if he could be persuaded to use his mouth on her, she hated to think of her wetness on Gaston’s face. There was no need for him to carry the smell of her on his body. Nor did she ever want to smell like him—all sweat and steel and meat. She wouldn’t want him to come inside her. That would be too ordinary, too much like the relations she was supposed to have with that man. To have his seed inside her womb would be too much of a reminder that she had been meant to bear his children, to give him six or seven strapping boys like him.

The Dark One would never give her children. Belle took a breath before she began rubbing again. Even if she didn’t take her potion, they would have a hard time making a child if they kept being so creative. Did she want a child? But when had it ever mattered what she wanted? She had always known that being a wife was her duty, that being a mother was her greatest possible accomplishment. Nothing she could do before she married would ever be as valuable as the first son she gave her husband.

She would never give the Dark One a child, but she would give him pleasure. She would give him her obedience, her diligence, her humiliation. Whatever he wanted from her, body, mind or soul, she would give it to him.

What else would he do to her? What else would he want from her? What else would she be able to do for him? Belle’s body jerked suddenly and she curled up around her hand, clenching so hard it was almost painful.

She lay on her side and breathed. After a moment, she took her hand away from her secret places. Soon, surely, she would learn the answers to her questions. For now, Belle closed her eyes, and went to sleep.

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Belle woke up to something cold trickling down onto her skin. She felt the cool wetness first, before she heard the steady sound of rain. Half asleep, she rolled away from the wall and the stream of rainwater that ran down the stone and onto her bench.

The bench was too narrow for her to roll far. Groaning, Belle sat up and opened her eyes. It was a gloomy day, gray and cold. It would have been miserable even if she hadn’t woken up with her back drenched in water.

Days ago, she had hung up her golden gown through the bars of her cell to keep it off the damp floor. Now Belle saw that the entire thing was soaked through and dripping water onto her head.

She sighed and yanked the dress away from the window. “I know I wasn’t going to wear you again anyway,” she said. “But such a fine gown still deserves a better end than this.”

Her mother’s family had worked together—her aunts and uncles and grandfather all calling in favors--
to give her that dress in time for her betrothal feast. But there was nothing she could do to save it. Wadding up the ruined, precious fabric into a messy ball, Belle tossed it into the corner by her waste bucket.

She thought of Alix, the little village girl who had been so delighted to see Belle in all her finery. The child might be disappointed if she ever heard of what happened to this gown. Could she understand that Belle ruining a dress had saved her life, saved all of their lives?

It hurt to think of home, to think of all the people that had loved her and who she had loved. She would never see them again. Her father, her cousins, her friends--even the servants and villagers had been a part of her life. But they were all gone from her now. And she had no objects to tie her to them. She had nothing from home. Mama was dead and Belle didn’t even have her necklace to remember her by.

If Belle mourned the loss of anything from her old life, it was that necklace. The Dark One still had it, somewhere. He had said it was safe, after he had taken it from her. She still didn’t understand why he wanted it. Rumpelstiltskin hadn’t taken anything since then, except her virginity and her right to hold a hairbrush. What did it profit him to steal the necklace from her?

Between her thoughts and the rain, Belle knew she wouldn’t get back to sleep. So she decided to start her day. She used the bucket and washed her body, took a drink and straightened her robe. The cuffs didn’t keep her from combing her hair with her fingers, but she would have to wait for Rumpelstiltskin to come and give her a proper brushing.

She would have to wait. The back half of the bench was soaking wet, so Belle had to sit primly on the edge and try to avoid the spray. She would have to sit. And wait.

She had never waited for him before. He had always come to her, even before she had woken up. The Dark One measured her days out for her, no matter what time it truly was. Noon or dawn or the middle of the night, if he wanted her she would serve him.

But now, after last night… He had said he wouldn’t want her today. Using magic to pleasure her must have depleted him. Belle’s shoulders slumped. If Rumpelstiltskin wasn’t coming, what on earth was she supposed to do for the rest of the day?

There was nothing in the cell to entertain her. No work for her to do, not even embroidery. She couldn’t even sit comfortably, and perhaps that was the worst part. Belle had an imagination, at home she had often been accused of daydreaming during her lessons. In her bed at home or sitting in a soft chair, she easily could have spent hours imagining and exploring her own mind. But this? Perched on a corner of a bench in the middle of an endless drizzle? There was no contentment here.

Determined to act, Belle stood up. She climbed up onto the bench and looked out the windows. There was nothing in front of her but an expanse of mud and rain. The bars were much too close together for Belle to even consider squeezing through to make an escape. She could barely fit her arm through them.

And it wasn’t that she wanted to escape. Running from the Dark One was an exercise in futility and it would only irritate him. Belle wanted to honor her deal. She didn’t want to leave the castle.

But she would die of boredom if she had to stay in the cell all day.

Hopping off the bench, Belle went to the door. She was too short to look through the grate and see into the hallway outside. But perhaps if she got up onto the handle, that would give her a boost and
she could have a look around. The door handle was sturdy iron, more than enough to support her little weight.

Stretching one leg up so high that her foot was at the level of her waist, Belle pushed her foot on the thumbpiece. She tried to pull the rest of her body up, but she felt the lever sink down under her foot and heard the latch release.

The door swung open.

Gaping, Belle slowly lowered her foot. The door was open. The hallway was in front of her. Nothing barred the way.

“What?” she said out loud. This was a dungeon. This was a prison cell. The doors were not supposed to open.

A sudden fear took hold of her, that this was a trap, an illusion, that to go out that door was to ask for certain death. On a mad impulse, Belle pushed the door shut and slammed it as hard as she could. She leaned her back against the wood and took a few shaking breaths.

Nothing happened. There was no blast of fire, no mocking voice berating her for trying to escape. The door stayed shut, and she stayed safe.

Safe, Belle thought, and alone. Safe, and bored. Safe, but too afraid to take a chance. That wasn’t her.

Besides, what did safety matter anymore? She was the Dark One’s property now. Every breath she took was only at his sufferance. Whatever happened to her was what he wanted to happen to her. He hadn’t ordered her to stay in the cell, she couldn’t be responsible for what happened if she left it. If he had forgotten to lock the door, then it was his own fault that she could walk out.

What if he had left the door open intentionally?

Either way, if Belle opened the door again, something more interesting would happen than if she didn’t. Squaring her shoulders, she reached out her hand, grasped the handle, and pulled.

It opened again. Heart racing, Belle closed her eyes and dashed out of the cell, bracing herself for whatever attack might come.

But nothing came. There was no alarm, no magic pushing her back into her prison. The door didn’t even close behind her but stayed ajar, inviting her to go back whenever the mood took her.

Belle looked around the dungeon halls. They were as dark and shadowy as ever, but she was free to walk them. The cuffs on her wrists were lifeless and inert--there was no order keeping her where she was.

With an incredulous snort, Belle started out for a walk.

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All the other cells in the dungeon were empty. Belle looked through every grate to make sure of it. To her mind, there were two possibilities for people the Dark One would keep as a prisoner: Either
there would be thieves and deal-breakers who would be kept prisoner and face the Dark One’s wrath, or there would be other young women like her who would be compelled to face his lusts. Belle couldn’t have said which prospect frightened her more. She was glad that she didn’t have to face either possibility.

She didn’t think about where she was going. That was a problem for later on. Belle had always liked exploring uncharted territories. When she was small, she had dreamed of traveling the world, filling out the blank spaces on maps, seeing vistas and creatures that no other person had ever seen before. Seeing different castles and grounds had been the best part of visiting relatives with her parents. And she had made a second home of the forest around her family’s lodge. That knowledge had been useful, when she’d had to run from ogres.

Every castle Belle had ever been in had been stuffed with people. Courtiers and pages and serving maids and stable boys, lords and ladies and rat catchers and dogs. You could tell the importance of a person by the size of their entourage, measure wealth by the number of servants in a household.

But here—in the grandest castle Belle had ever seen, home of a man who could spin straw into gold—there was no one. Her footsteps echoed in the empty space.

She had known that the food she ate was produced by magic, but it still shocked her to walk into a vast kitchen that was cold and desolate. There wasn’t even a fire burning in the hearth. Everything was clean and orderly, the pots and pans gleamed with shine—because they had never been used. Belle thought of the kitchen at home, of the roaring fire and the baker’s ovens and the half-dozen scullery maids and cooks’ boys who prepared all the food for the entire castle, of the constant activity of the cooking and cleaning and baking and eating. In comparison, this place was a tomb.

Unsettled, Belle kept moving. The servant’s quarters lined the halls. She opened a few doors to look inside. Like the kitchen, every room was bright and neat and lifeless. It was so wrong. All of it. A castle was a place for people, but there were no people here. Only her. And the Dark One.

Perhaps that explained a thing or two about him, why he could be so peculiar and temperamental. If a person was accustomed to living alone, to having no other soul around, then perhaps a sudden intrusion would be unsettling. But he wanted her here, Belle reminded herself. How could she be intruding if she was only in his company when he ordered her to be there? Still, if Rumpelstiltskin wasn’t used to anyone else, then it made sense that he sometimes wouldn’t know how to act.

The bedrooms became richer as Belle went on. The rooms were getting larger, the furniture inside still plain, but better made than what was found in the servant’s quarters. This section was probably the nurseries, the homes of governesses and wet nurses who were charged to care for the children of the castle.

The rooms of the actual heirs to all this grandeur were absurdly luxurious. In one room Belle found not only a child-sized table—complete with porcelain plates, silverware, and fine glass goblets—but also an even smaller replica of the same place settings on an even smaller table set up for dolls. The princes and princesses who had lived in this castle had better objects for their toys than Belle had ever eaten off of herself.

She closed that door behind her and eventually made her way back to the dining room. Like every other room in the castle, it was empty. But unlike any other room, the fireplace here still smoldered. She entered through the back door, near the glass-fronted cabinets. It was so strange to be here alone. Without Rumpelstiltskin, this was a different room altogether.

Belle’s cheeks flushed when she looked at the table or the carpet by the fire. What if she laid out on those surfaces with her legs spread? What if she sat in one of his chairs? What if she opened the
cabinets and looked at his books? What if she waited here for him, made him search for her? Would he punish her for invading his space? Would he be pleased to see her?

But there was still so much more to look at. Belle couldn’t stop her journey at the first familiar place. She went back into the hall, ignoring even the tempting double doors on the other side of the dining room. Those doors, she knew, led to the foyer, and the way out. But she wasn’t going to leave. She turned away.

The landing that led to the dining room had other hallways and staircases that lead from it. She took a short flight up and came upon two sets of doors that faced each other on either side of a wide corridor. The doors were identical, so Belle picked one side at random to open first.

When she opened the door, the room was dark—the curtains drawn, and no fire lit. But as soon as Belle stepped over the threshold, a dozen candles in sconces and candelabras around the room all lit up at once. It was a bedchamber, as large as the dining room. The bed itself—canopied and hung with lush curtains—was the size of the cell Belle slept in. Everything in the room—the bed clothes, the carpets, the wall-hangings, the upholstered chairs—everything was dyed a sumptuous, royal blue. The wood of the bed and the furniture was dark brown, but polished to a shine. It was beautiful.

Surely this was Rumpelstiltskin’s bedchamber. Could there be a grander room than this, even in so large of a castle? Belle had poked her head in the door of a few rooms on her way up to this level. All of the adult bedrooms had been grander than anything she had at home. But this room was a giant among giants! What other room would be fitting for the master of the castle to inhabit?

If it was his room, then it was a private place. Belle realized that she shouldn’t intrude any more than she already had. Backing out of the room slowly, she shut the door quietly behind her.

The door on the other side of the hallway was just as large and ornately carved as the one she had just closed. When she opened the other door, this room was just as dark as the one across the hall.

But when she tried to step into that room, the cuffs would not allow her. They pinned her hands to a fixed point in the air on the outside of threshold, and Belle was powerless to move them. She stepped backwards and they released her, but when she moved forward again, they held her hands in place, keeping her from getting any closer.

No candles lit inside the room, but light from the torches in the hallway cast long shadows into the forbidden chamber. Belle craned her neck to see inside. Was it another bedroom? She couldn’t see how large it was, or what color matched the decor. All she could see was brokenness.

There was a bed in the center of the room, but it was piled high with books and parchment. Two of the bedposts were splintered and the canopy sagged, the bed curtains in tatters. It would be impossible to sleep there. Perhaps that was the point.

Other furniture was also battered and toppled over. Jagged lengths of wood jutted out from the outlines of broken wardrobes and tables. On the floor, Belle saw shards of wood, shattered glass, torn fabric and other rubble.

The light caught one wall and Belle gasped. There were dents in the stone. Circular dents cracked into the rock—a sudden, violent, powerful impact. They were scattered around the wall, like a border marking roughly the same height. Roughly the height of a short man’s reach.

Her mouth went dry and she knew: Fists. Those were fist marks. In addition to all his terrible magic, the Dark One had enough strength to punch a dent into solid rock.
She stepped back, away from this room, from the darkness and anger and pain that permeated it. Belle could sense the hurt of this place as though it were a foul odor. Her nails dug into her palms and she forced herself to breathe. This was the Dark One’s room. It was the only room in the castle that looked like it had been used at all and it was the den of a monster. Rumpelstiltskin didn’t sleep, read everything, and broke his things when he was angry. This was the man she had bound herself to forever.

But she wasn’t afraid. This room hadn’t told her anything she didn’t already know. Rumpelstiltskin was forthright with his nature, he hadn’t hidden anything of himself from her. She had known he was the Dark One long before he had given her any hints that he might be more. Perhaps she was a fool to think of him with sympathy—but she couldn’t imagine herself doing anything less.

She turned her back on the angry room, and went through a door built into the end of the hallway. The door led to a of flight wooden, narrow stairs. Curling in a tight spiral, the steps led Belle up to a tower. As she walked, Belle became aware of a sound. It was a faint, whirring noise that grew louder as she got closer to the top of the stairs. Aside from her own footsteps, it was the first sound she’d heard all day.

The room at the top of the stairs was mostly wood. Wooden floor, wood-paneled walls, wooden shelves and cupboards, a wooden work table that was covered with strange glass equipment. There were large windows on either side of the room. They would have caught the light on a fine day, but today just caught the gloom. The ceiling was white plaster that arched up from all sides to meet at the center of the circular room.

The whirring noise was coming from by the window. From the great spinning wheel that stood in the far end of the room. From Rumpelstiltskin. He had his back to her, as he sat in front of the wheel. On the floor by his feet there was a basket of straw, but on the bobbin of the spinning wheel there was a skein of gold.

“So you found me.” His voice was quiet, distracted. He didn’t turn around but he knew she was there. He kept his eyes on his work.

“The door was unlocked,” Belle explained. “The door to my cell, I mean.”

“It always was, dearie,” he said in the same distant tone. “I don’t need locks and doors to keep you where I want you.”

Oh. Oh, of course. His magic was more powerful than any amount of stone and wood and iron. All the trappings of a dungeon had been just to frighten her, not to hold her. He had placed her in the appearance of a prison, but left out the function of it. She had taken her surroundings at face value. But she should have known better than that. She should have known to take the Dark One only at his word, and not at his impression.

She would do better in the future.

“May I come in?” The steps ended where the floor of the room began. Belle stood on the top step, wary of crossing into Rumpelstiltskin’s domain.

“You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t allowed to be.”

“I know, Rumpelstiltskin,” she said. “But permitted isn’t the same as invited.”

The whirring stopped for a moment, but he still didn’t look at her. “That’s true,” he said, and the whirring started up again. “Then by all means, I invite you in.”
“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin.” Belle took the last step up and walked into the circular tower room.

“You needn’t be here, you know,” he said as she came closer to him. “I can come and fetch you when I want you. You can keep exploring my home and searching for treasure.”

“I was not!”

“Not all treasure is silver and gold, dearie.” His hands stayed busy turning straw into gold, but he spared a quick, sly glance in her direction.

Belle sat on the floor by his feet, covering herself as best she could with her robe. “Are you alright?” she asked after a while. “After last night, I mean.”

“Of course I am,” he chirped, his eyes on the wheel. “Fit enough to service the likes of you when I’ve a mind to.”

Belle felt her cheeks grow warm. “I don’t need ‘servicing,’ Rumpelstiltskin. I was asking about you, not your cock.”

She saw his grin. “My cock and my self are both fine. We thank you for your concern. But I have a good deal of straw to spin yet and it will take the rest of the day. I don’t plan to avail myself of your charms until then.” He fed another stalk of straw into the orifice of the wheel. “You really don’t have to stay with me.”

Belle shrugged. “There’s no one else, is there? Besides, I’ve been walking all afternoon. I’d like to rest here, if I may.”

Still with his hands working the straw, he made a dismissive face. “No reason to stop you. But I can’t have you complaining about being bored or distracting me with chatter. Here!” He inclined his head to the ground, and Belle saw an object sitting on the floor between them.

“A book!” Belle nearly laughed aloud. “Thank you!” She picked it up and pressed it to her chest. Without a moment’s pause, Belle leaned over to the ground and placed a quick kiss on each of his boots.

Rumpelstiltskin looked down at her, his hands at his sides, the wheel completely still. “You’re welcome,” he said stiffly.

Belle rubbed her hands over the cover of the book. It was bound in copper-colored silk that shimmered when she moved it. On the front cover, there were two snakes, one light and one dark, each biting the other’s tail and forming an oval. Inside the oval was the book’s title:

“Unendliche Geschichte,” Belle struggled over the strange language. “Am I supposed to be able to read this?”

“Anyone can read that book, even if they can’t read anything else.” He had begun spinning again, his attention drawn back into his wheel.

A magic book! Belle leafed through the pages and saw that it was written in two different colors of ink. There were no illustrations, but the first letter of every chapter was illuminated beautifully. She skimmed pages here and there before she began, catching glimpses of a story about an empress and an oracle, a boy with a horse, a lion who lived in a desert made of rainbow colored sand, and an old man in the mountains. On the very last page, Belle saw that there was no last page. The text at the end of the book wrote itself as she read it, changing every time she shifted her gaze. A story that never ends!
But how did it begin?

Belle curled up in a ball at Rumpelstiltskin’s feet and started at the beginning.
Belle read for the rest of the afternoon. Sprawled out on the ground at Rumpelstiltskin’s feet, she let the book take her to a land more magical and adventurous than any she’d ever known. She followed the story of a brave warrior and his talking horse as they went on a great quest to save an empress whose health was fading at the same rate as the very existence of her kingdom. Together, Belle and the warrior travelled through the new land. They met friends and faced dangers and struggled ever onward, always just ahead of the terrible enemy that threatened to make them Nothing.

As gray evening turned into black night, Belle read of the warrior arriving at the ivory tower where the empress held her court. Here, he would give her the gem that would save her life and all of her people! Belle squinted at the page, trying to get just a little more of the story before the endeavor became completely hopeless. But there were no candles lit in Rumpelstiltskin’s tower, no fire for light or warmth.

With a chilled shiver, she admitted defeat. It was too dark to read. Belle looked up at Rumpelstiltskin. Could she ask him for a light? How much longer would he keep spinning?

He worked steadily, in the fluid motion of a master craftsman. Throughout the day, Belle had stolen looks at him often enough to know how he worked. He fed straw into the spinning wheel’s orifice, seamlessly joining the stalks together to form an endless thread of wound gold on the bobbin. It was a great wheel he worked at, as tall as she was. His hand spun the large wheel lazily, but it hadn’t stopped all day.

Belle shut her book with more force than was strictly needed. The noise jolted Rumpelstiltskin out of the trance his spinning had woven around him. For the first time since Belle had sat down, he began to move. His feet shuffled and his body shifted on the stool.

“Oh,” he said. There were shadows enough that Belle could make out the shape of him. He looked around at the darkened tower. Was he surprised that it was suddenly nighttime?

He snapped his fingers and candles lit all over the room. Belle had half a mind to open the book again and see what the empress had to say to her warrior, but Rumpelstiltskin surprised her by standing up. He got up from the stool and removed the bobbin of gold from the flyer.

Belle looked up at him. “How do you know when to stop?” she asked. “Do you measure out enough gold to make a thousand coins and decide that’s enough for one day?”

“The gold is a day,” he answered quietly. He slid the thread off the bobbin and wound it neatly into a ball. Holding the ball of gold in one hand he opened a tall cupboard that was stacked with crowded shelves, each shelf weighed down by similar balls of thread. “These spools measure time. Sunrise to sunset. I try to make the whole thing in one go without stopping. I shall have to get another cabinet
Belle gawked at the shelf. There were hundreds of spools in that cupboard. Hundreds of days, sunrise to sunset, that he had spent alone, with nothing to do but endlessly spin.

Rumpelstiltskin shut the cupboard and turned his back to it. “So, dearie!” his voice was bright and purposeful. “You wandered right into the monster’s den. Very foolish!” He waggled his finger at her.

Belle blinked at the abrupt change in his tone. The game was beginning. She shook her hair over her shoulders and played along. “I'm not afraid.”

“Ah, well you’ve never seen what I do to prisoners who break out of their cells to go for a stroll.” He sauntered into the center of the room, filling the empty floor with his motions like a mummer on the stage.

Crawling on the floor, Belle moved, close enough to watch him but not so close that she took his place on the imaginary stage. After all, she was his audience, even if she was also part of the show. “I didn’t break out of anything, Rumpelstiltskin. The door opened. You never said I had to stay in that cell.”

“If I did would you listen to me?”

She raised one cuffed wrist. “I would have to.”

“Well then wasn’t I clever to put those on you?”

“Oh yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” she grinned up at him. “You are the cleverest of all men.”

He scoffed. “You are a flatterer as well as a flirt. You know I’m not a man.”

“I am not a flatterer. You are clever.”

“But not a man.”

“If you’re not a man, what do you call that?” Still on the floor, Belle crawled onto the stage and knelt so that her face was directly in front of the bulge between his legs. She was upstaging him, but perhaps it wouldn’t matter. In his games she had freedom to speak boldly and act brazenly. “Is this not a manhood? Do you not take me as a man takes a woman?”

She looked up at him, and he was looking down at her, his expression not angry, but not playful either. His voice was almost a whisper as he ordered: “Kiss me, Belle. Right there.”

Belle pressed her mouth to his leather breeches, feeling the bulge grow larger against her lips. His body was warm against her face, a comfort in this cold room. Rumpelstiltskin put his hand on the back of her head and pressed her into him. She waited for the moment when he would free his cock and order her to suck on him, but that moment didn’t come. He just held her close, silently, and ran his fingers through her hair.

Belle was about to ask if she had played the game wrong when her growling stomach broke the silence.

Only then did she remember: She hadn’t had breakfast yet. She hadn’t eaten all day. She had been too involved in her exploration, and then in the book, and then in Rumpelstiltskin. She hadn’t thought of it, but her body had not forgotten what she needed.
Rumpelstiltskin chuckled and took a step back from her. “Is that why you’re so mouthy today, my girl? But my cock isn’t really a fit meal.”

Blushing crimson, Belle shook her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin—”

But he waved her into silence. “Stand up, silly thing. And come with me. I’m feeling rather peckish myself.”

They descended the tower steps and went to the dining room. On the way down, Belle noticed that the door to the angry room was securely shut, though she was sure she had left it ajar in her haste to get away.

In the dining room, Rumpelstiltskin sat at his chair at the head of the table. There was a place setting already laid out, an empty plate and silverware and a cut glass goblet for wine.

“There will be food in the cupboard,” he declared. “Get it out and serve it to me.”

Belle nodded and the cuffs pulled her to the cupboard that usually held the tea tray. This time when she opened the door she found a basket of steaming hot rolls. The smell of fresh bread made her stomach ache. She took the basket and went to Rumpelstiltskin.

“Set that down on the table. And bring the rest. Don’t stop until the cupboard is empty.”

After the rolls was a loaf of brown bread on a cutting board with a knife. She carried that to the table. When she came back to the cupboard she found a tray of flaky, crescent-shaped pastries. Then oat cakes. Then a tray of several different butters and jams and chutneys to spread on all the breads she had just brought out.

She wanted to rest, but the cuffs wouldn’t let her stop. After the breads, the cupboard produced three tureens of soup, one right after the other. They were heavy and awkward to carry over to the table. But she didn’t spill a drop.

Then there was a seafood course: salmon roasted whole, scallops cooked in butter. A barrel of oysters on ice should not have fit inside the wooden cupboard, but somehow one came out. She pulled out all manner of sea creatures, cooked until they were bright red—some small enough to eat by the handful and others large enough to merit their own platter.

Belle felt weak. The smells tantalized her aching stomach. The exertion of carrying so many heavy loads wearied her arms and legs. She tried not to imagine eating any of this fine food, not to assume that she would eat anything at all tonight. This was the Dark One’s meal. He would give her what he wanted her to have.

The fowl ranged from a plate of six braised birds each small enough to perch in her hand, to an enormous roast that was almost too cumbersome to move. A roasted duck, cooked with some fragrant fruit, made her mouth water. She served squab and hens and peacock and swan. The table was half covered now, with food enough for twenty men. Rumpelstiltskin had not begun to eat. He sat at the head of the table with his fingers steepled under his chin. His expression was hungry, but he only looked at Belle.

Course by course, she brought the food from the cupboard to the table. She served him endless trays of meat in juices and sauces and gravies. After she nearly dropped a whole suckling pig, she took a moment to wipe the sweat off her brow.

“You’re not done yet, dearie!” There was an imperious air to his voice, an artificial brightness that made Belle grind her teeth.
“I know,” she muttered.

She took out bowls of vegetables of all kinds, platters of cooked fruits, cakes and pastries beyond counting. One dessert was on fire when she opened the cupboard, and remained burning without being consumed while she took it to the table. Then there were the endless casks of wines, meads, beers, brandys, milks and teas to quench his thirst.

The last food that appeared in the cupboard was the tea tray. As had become a custom, she brought the silver tray over to the Dark One and poured tea into the unchipped cup. With three sugars and cream, she presented it to him.

He took a sip and nodded. “It appears that that’s everything.”

Everything for him. Nothing for her.

“Shall I serve you?” She tried to keep her voice steady. “What would you like first?”

“First, I would like you to kiss my boots,” he said.

Belle fell to her knees without reluctance, but grimaced against the leather.

“And stay down there. I can manage this myself.”

It was a relief to be ordered not to show her face to him. She didn’t trust herself to show him what he wanted. She was too weary and too hungry to play anymore.

Belle didn’t kneel, but sat by his feet like a petulant child, her arms crossed over her knees. Would that posture compress her stomach? Could she trick it into feeling full even if she hadn’t eaten anything? She pressed her eyes into her knees, trying to fight the leaking tears.

After a few minutes, something fell onto Belle’s shoulder and bounced onto the floor. She looked at the thing, the small orange cube. A carrot?

“Oh drat, how clumsy of me,” Rumpelstiltskin’s voice came down from above the table in an odd pantomime of vexation.

Wordlessly, Belle picked up the carrot and offered it to him.

“No no no, it’s been on the floor!” He protested grandly, waving his hand. He pretended to have an idea. “But I suppose you could eat it. If you don’t mind the indignity.”

Oh. Oh, of course. Just like always, she would have to humiliate herself in order to eat. It was such a cruel game, but one she was too hungry not to play.

Belle put the carrot in her mouth. It was hot, and sweet, and carroty. Belle enjoyed the taste despite her exasperation. Why couldn’t he tell her the rules before he began to play with her?

“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin.” She made her voice sweet and kissed his boots.

From above the table, Belle heard him snort.

It wasn’t long before he dropped something else. It was a bite of meat this time, and Belle picked it up and ate without asking.

“Whatever has overtaken me today?” he acted like he was talking to himself. “I seem to be having some kind of fit!” As he spoke, he flung an entire plateful of food over his shoulder and onto the
ground behind him. Belle crawled out to take the hot food in her hands and eat.

His chair turned around while he sat, looking at her with his face unmoving. From the floor, Belle met his gaze, but she kept devouring scraps like a beggar until there was nothing left on the floor.

“You could have just asked me, you know.” His soft voice broke the silence. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you, but I’d forgotten… I’d forgotten that you need to eat even when I don’t have use for you.”

Belle wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She tried to think of something to say, some way to tell him how she felt when she didn’t understand herself. “If it is your pleasure to starve me, then I will starve,” she tried. “I thought you wanted me to be miserable.”

“And sometimes I do. But you must tell me what you want and then I will decide whether or not to give it to you.”

She blinked. When had it ever mattered what she wanted? “So… all the food on the table, that’s not just to taunt me and torment me?”

“It was to tempt you, my girl. To show you all that I could give you, if only you would ask for it.”

Belle swallowed down the taste of the food she had scraped off the floor. “Your intentions were subtle.”

His hands bunched into fists, but his eyes did not leave her face. “Why haven’t you asked yet, Belle?”

Was it really so easy? “Rumpelstiltskin, may I have some food?”

“Yes,” he breathed. His eyes slowly closed, then opened. “You may have anything on the table. What would you like?”

Belle still couldn’t believe that she could get something just by asking for it. “The duck smelled wonderful.”

“Will you come back here to me?” The chair turned around and Belle crawled to kneel at his side. He carved off a slice of meat then picked it up and held it in his fingers. “Will you eat from my hand?”

Belle kept her hands on the ground as she took a dainty bite into her mouth. The duck was delicious and tender. She kissed his fingers when she had eaten all of it.

“Good girl,” he said softly. “Now do you want more of that or something different?”

“Different, please. Whatever you care to give me.”

“I will give you good things, Belle. As long as you ask me to.”

Rumpelstiltskin fed her from his hand. The whole meal, she knelt on the ground and he passed food down to her. When she was done with a bite, she would kiss his fingertips and he would caress her face, rub his thumb over her lips. With every morsel, he would let her know how good she was, how obedient.

From her vantage point on the floor, Belle couldn’t tell if he was actually eating anything himself. The game might have worked better if he was, especially if he had companion who was seated at the table with him. That was an image that sparked desire in Belle’s mind: the Dark One hosting an
important guest, making deals with kings and wizards--and casually pausing in the middle of a sentence to give a scrap of food to his pet, to her.

How strange that she liked this game, Belle thought as she licked his fingers. He was treating her like a dog again, but it wasn’t humiliating this time. It was an act of affection that he was giving her, and he was allowing her to be affectionate toward him. After all, no one loved anyone the way a dog loved someone giving them food.

Belle almost spat out her cheese at that thought. Did Rumpelstiltskin really want her to love him? No. No, of course not. But he was not discouraging her affection. He seemed pleased by her enthusiasm, as she kissed his hands and sucked juices off his fingers.

He fed her tastes of nearly everything on the table, every bird and fish, every vegetable and fruit. Bite by bite he fed her until she had to smile and say, “Enough, I’m done!”

“Two more, sweet girl. Two more things I want to put in your mouth.”

By this time, Belle was kneeling between his legs, looking up at him with her chin resting on the seat of his chair.

“Something sweet for you.” He showed her the dollop of light gray cream he had on two fingers. He put the cream in her mouth and kept his fingers inside her while she tasted it, only removing them after she swallowed.

“That’s delicious,” she said, keeping her eyes closed to enjoy the flavors of his skin mixed with sugary cream.

“And also, my dear, something sweet for me.” He scooted his chair up to the table, so that Belle had to back up for a moment before she could lean against him again, lean against the bulge in his now-open breeches. So that was how he wanted her to end her meal.

She nodded to herself. Fair enough.

It was dark under the table, but not the pitch blackness that her cell was on the night he had woken her to teach her how to perform this duty. No cloth draped over the tabletop and Belle could see the by firelight from the hearth. She saw the outline of Rumpelstiltskin’s cock, saw the proud tilt as it raised above his thighs.

She reached out to touch it, and felt the heat of him on her fingers. This was the first time she had held him in her hand. Curious, she traced the length of it with one finger, taking care to touch him with the pad of her fingertip and not the nail. His warning about teeth would surely apply to anything sharp or hard. As she held his cock in one hand, she felt the hardness of him, clothed in a loose skin that she could move back and forth around that hardened core.

She stroked him to the base of it, to the part where his cock met his groin. There was only a slight opening through Rumpelstiltskin’s leather breeches that allowed this part of him to escape. She tried to feel for a binding she might loosen to undress him, even slightly. She wanted to understand Rumpelstiltskin’s body, to know how best to please him--but the darkness and his clothing hindered her exploration.

“I believe I told you to use your mouth, dearie.” His voice came down, condescending.

Defiant, Belle set her hands on either of his leather-clad thighs and opened her mouth wide enough to take half his cock at once. She sucked on him--hard--and was gratified to hear cutlery rattling as he slammed his fist on the table.
His other hand grabbed her by the hair and pulled her mouth away from his cock. He stood up and pulled her off the floor. The pain in Belle’s scalp was excruciating but thrilling.

“You are a wicked girl,” he said, cheerfully. “And that is not a word I use lightly.”

Spittle stuck to her lips as she grinned at him. “I’m not sorry.”

“Nor should you be.” He let go of her hair and sat back down in the chair, pulling it a little away from the table. “But I don’t trust your mouth right now.” He patted his knee. “Come sit, facing me.”

The cuffs pulled her to wrap her hands around the carved spires that adorned the top of his chair. She positioned herself with both legs on either side of his, her robe opened to give him access to all her treasures. She could see his cock a little better now. It bobbed, upright between their bodies, a shadow in the darkness.

Her face was a little above Rumpelstiltskin’s. She looked down at him and saw his eyes, wide and black with lust. He put one hand behind her back, to keep her steady, and with the other he parted her folds.

His nostrils flared when he touched her. “So!” he exclaimed. “What makes you wet tonight, my slut?”

Belle bit her lower lip but couldn’t stop her smile. “You do, Rumpelstiltskin.”

His fingers kept up their work in her. “Tell me what I did to put you in this state.”

“You fed me like a dog,” she answered. “You made me depend on you--on you, your hands, not your magic--for my basic comforts. You made me need you tonight.”

“And you like that?”

Belle closed her eyes, accepting the truth to herself even as she told it to him: “I do.”

“Well, I like this,” he said as he rubbed her wetness around on his fingers. He put them in his mouth--eyes closed to savor the taste--and Belle felt something clench inside her. Rumpelstiltskin opened his eyes and put his hand on Belle’s breast. “And I like these,” he said. He squeezed her roughly into his palm, then pinched at her nipple until Belle whined with desire.

“Do you want something, little one?”

She nodded.

“Then ask me for it.”

“Please, Rumple--” His fingernail scraped at her nipple and the jolt of pleasure took her words away from her before she could finish the name. Belle gasped and said the next sentence in a one breath: “Rumpelstiltskin, please put your cock in me!”

“If you insist.” He took his hand away from her breast and used it to guide his manhood inside her. Belle lowered herself onto him, wrapping her legs through the space between the arms of the chair.

They faced each other now. Belle had her arms around his neck and he was holding her waist with both hands. By silent agreement, they both took a moment to adjust to the position. His eyes were still lustful, but tinged with caution, concern. He seemed ready to abandon this endeavour if he sensed that she wasn’t up to the challenge.
Belle nodded, trying to let him know that she was ready for this, that she wanted him and wanted to have him in this manner. It was new, it was only moderately comfortable, but she wasn’t afraid.

“You’ll have to do the thrusting, my sweet. Take your time, go easy if you have a need. I won’t rush you.”

Belle experimented with different ways to settle her body, trying to find the exact configuration that would be comfortable as well as pleasurable. It felt so good even to stay still with him inside her, to let him fill her. But she had to move, even if it felt superfluous.

She started slowly, simply. She pulled herself down as far as she could go without it hurting, and then pushed her body up as far as she could without having him pop out of her. In and out, the familiar rhythm. Being on top of him like this, Belle was able to control how deeply he went in to her, how quickly.

In the firelight, she was able to watch his face. His eyes were so dark she could see her body reflected in them. In his eyes, her flesh wavered like a delicate flame--pale and small and always moving.

Holding on to the chair arms, Belle leaned back to let him get a full look at her. After a moment, she stopped moving to untie her robe and shrug it off her shoulders. She wanted him to see her naked.

He didn’t say anything, but did nod his approval.

“Rumpelstiltskin, am I pretty?”

Without a word, he shifted his position so that Belle fell forward onto his body. He caught her upper arms and held her as still. His black eyes slowly looked her over. He leaned in and smelled her hair, her neck, the sweat on her chest.

“You,” he said at last, his voice so deep as to be nearly growling, “are the most ravishing creature I’ve seen in a hundred years.”

Again she felt the clenching between her legs, only now it had his cock to clench onto. He could feel it too. His hands gripped Belle more tightly for a moment, then relaxed.

He used both hands to touch her breasts and in no time at all, he was sucking on her. Belle clenched at the feeling and then again when she looked down and saw his green-gray skin against the soft pink of her flesh, his bright red tongue teasing her dark red nipple.

She cried out at the sight, and when he opened his eyes she cried out again. He looked at her as though she were the entire world. As though he were starving and she the finest meal. As though there was nothing he wanted more than to have her and devour her--consume her in every way imaginable.

The clenchings were coming more frequently and she realized she was coming. He kept his eyes on her while she tried to stay focused on her movements. She wanted to keep his cock in her. It felt so good to come around his cock.

But then he placed one finger on one spot between her legs and Belle was done for.

Her orgasm was loud and almost panicked. She was afraid that she would lose his cock in her frenzy--when that was what had brought her to this state in the first place. His cock and his mouth and his fingers and his eyes.

She screamed and held on to him for all she was worth while the waves of pleasure threatened to
carry her away. For his part, he held her close and encouraged her passion with filthy words exclaimed loud enough for her to hear.

By the time she was finished, Belle had jerked herself away from Rumpelstiltskin and his cock and the chair. She was half-leaning, half-lying on the table, panting and throbbing.

Rumpelstiltskin stood up from the chair, his cock still hard in his hand. “Your mouth again, Belle. Quickly!”

She leaned forward to swallow him, tasting her own wetness as she sucked. He came in no time at all and the shock of it made her recoil. She moved her head away but held him in her hand as his seed poured out over her. For the first time, she was able to examine the evidence of his pleasure.

The fluid was dark, but glinted gold in the firelight, like his skin. The contrast of his darkness against her pale flesh was captivating. Rumpelstiltskin stepped away, but Belle kept staring at what he left on her hand.

It was hot on her skin, as warm as his body against hers. It had an odor, but the only word Belle could think of to describe it was “fleshy.” She tasted it, as she had tasted so many things that night, and found it to be not unpleasant. Salty, and fleshy again. Strange, but not terrible.

“Oh, stop that, girl,” Rumpelstiltskin said, exasperated. “You’ve already impressed me.” He produced a handkerchief and took Belle’s hand to wipe away all traces of himself.

Belle said nothing and allowed herself to be cared for. Rumpelstiltskin’s hands were gentle, as he cleaned his pleasure off of her. Standing her up, he picked her robe off the floor and wrapped the blue silk around her shoulders. He brushed her hair back from her face and gave her a soft smile.

“Let me take you back to your cell.” He put his hand on Belle’s waist and lead her. “I wouldn’t want you to wander off and get lost.”

Belle looked down at the floor, at her bare feet walking beside his boots. “Will you lock me in, now that I know I can leave?”

“No,” he said softly. “The castle is your home now, you can go anywhere the cuffs allow.”

“May I come find you again?”

He glanced at her. “Why would you want to?”

She shrugged. “This place is lonely.”

“And you would suffer even my company?”

“It isn’t sufferance, Rumpelstiltskin. I like your company.”

They were quiet as he guided her through the halls of his castle. But it was a comfortable quiet, a companionable silence. The silence of two people who didn’t always need words.

That had been the best part of tonight, Belle decided. That moment of silent agreement, when both of them had trusted the other, when their minds had been as one as their bodies. They were like dancers now. They knew the steps they had to make and they trusted their partner to do their part.

“Belle.” He put his hand on her arm and they both stopped. He looked at her, his brow furrowed. “Belle, you don’t… hate me. You really don’t.”
It wasn’t a question, but he sounded so utterly confounded that Belle knew he needed her to answer.

“Hate you?” Belle almost wanted to laugh. But he was serious. He was looking at her as though she were the only star in an endless night. “No, Rumpelstiltskin.” She put her hand over his where he held her other arm. He tensed at her touch. “I’ve never hated you.”

Slowly, he began to nod. It looked as though he were considering new information, trying to understand some arcane mystery. “You should hate me,” he said after a pause. “You still can, if you want to.”

Belle nodded with all the solemnity that statement required. “I’ll keep that in mind, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He kept his hand on her arm as they walked back to the cell. They stood together in the doorway, and he did not let go of her arm.

“Sounds like the rain stopped,” Belle said for the sake of having something to say. She hoped her bench would be dry enough to sleep on with some comfort.

“Yes,” Rumpelstiltskin said distantly. For once, his eyes were not on her. They seemed to be looking at something a long way off.

Slowly, his hand trailed down her arm, his fingers lingering over the silk until he caught her hand in his. He brought it up to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Belle.” Now his eyes locked on hers again.

“Yes,” Belle agreed. Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough. “Good night, Rumpelstiltskin.”

His voice was no more than a shaky breath as he let go of her hand. “Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun Spinning Wheel Fact: The part that the wool is fed through is really called the orifice. I wouldn't have used that word if it wasn't the technical term!

Also, the parts of a chair that stick out over the back rest are called "ears." I didn't include that in the fic because if I said Belle wrapped her hands around the chair ears no one would have known what I meant.

Research is fun!
It took a little time for Belle to notice how much her days fell into a pattern. The first week she had spent in Rumpelstiltskin’s castle had been a blinding flurry of events—a constant stream of new experiences in her body and in her mind. Only gradually did she feel her new life settling into some kind of order.

Most days began with Rumpelstiltskin waking her up, brushing her hair, and making her work for her food.

“All right,” he said one morning, a bright glint in his eye. “Are you ready for a challenge?”

Kneeling on the floor, Belle nodded. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Good girl,” he grinned. “Stand up.”

The cuffs pulled Belle to her feet. The breakfast tray was still on the ground, magically set there so firmly that it might as well be part of the stone.

Rumpelstiltskin stood behind her and pulled the robe off her body. His hands crept around her curves as he spoke low into her ear: “Now bend over and grab your ankles.”

As usual, the cuffs did the work, pulling Belle to bend at the waist and locking her wrists to her legs. The tray was in front of her now, the bowl of porridge close enough that she could dip her tongue in it. She could eat, but she would have to do it upside down.

She could see Rumpelstiltskin’s feet between her legs, upside down from her perspective. Was he enjoying the view offered by her new position? Her bottom was exposed, her secret places no longer secret. Would he finger her while she tried to eat? Would he take her while she was like this?

“Eat up,” he said brightly. “Unless this is too much for you?”

“No,” Belle said, even as the blood rushed to her head. “It’s not too much.”

She was permitted to say it was too much. Sometimes he would tell her that that was the point, that he wanted her to suffer. Sometimes he would halt the game for a moment. He would allow her to
breathe, to gather her strength. Then he would tell her how good she was, how obedient, how strong and clever and beautiful. It might take a while, but the Dark One always got what he wanted from her.

Most days she enjoyed rising to his challenges. It surprised her to realize these games could be fun. There was a pleasure in being restricted and bound—and finding a way to work around those restrictions to get her reward. Every so often, she would look up at him while she performed, while she debased herself for his amusement. When he looked back at her, his eyes glowed softly, as though he were amazed by her. As though he were not just pleased by her humiliation, but proud of her accomplishment.

That was the look that made Belle want to keep rising to his challenges.

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“But look at your hair!” he said on another morning. “I spend precious time every day making it look presentable, but you still wake up with a rat’s nest on your head!”

Belle forced herself not to smile, to look convincingly apologetic and contrite. She pretended to pout, as he pretended to be annoyed. “I’m so sorry, Rumpelstiltskin. Please don’t punish me for being so careless.”

“Oh, you know I will punish you, my slut. I will hurt you from one end,” he pulled sharply at one of her curls, “to the other!” he smacked her hard on her bottom. The sound of the impact echoed in the small cell.

Belle felt her insides clench and bit her lips to keep her smile away.

Rumpelstiltskin sat on the bench. “Kneel,” he ordered. “Let me fix this catastrophe.”

She knelt between his legs, her face close to his groin. As usual for this game, she bowed her head and let him have access to her hair.

Regular brushing wasn’t this much of a production, but wash day was different. The magic cloth he had given her always steamed and bubbled with soap, so it was easy for her to wash her body and face whenever she needed to. But Rumpelstiltskin had claimed a special ownership over her hair. Only he could wash it and oil it and comb it out.

Warm water poured out from the air and he lathered her curls with lavender soap. More water to rinse—water that never left a puddle on the dungeon floor—and then the oil of roses.

When his hands were in her hair, Belle felt more owned than she did when his cock was inside her body. His hands in her hair controlled her, yes, but they also protected her, cherished her. The best part was when he would twist a strand of her curls between his thumb and forefinger, exactly the motion he used to spin his straw. That was when she knew she had value.

After he rubbed oil into her hair, he would usually keep spreading it onto her skin. At the very least he would rub her back. His hands were gentle but firm, pushing into the muscles under her skin. He would always point out marks on her body—bruises he had put there, or the faint bites and claw-marks left over from their coupling. Every time he rubbed her back, he told her it would get worse.
Belle believed him, but she wasn’t afraid.

“Stand up now,” he said. “Let me see your arse.”

Even more gently, he rubbed oil around her bottom. His touches were feather-light on her bruises—unless he didn’t want to be. Unless he wanted to make more bruises.

Belle didn’t mind the dull aches, but sometimes a sudden touch would make her wince or cry out. When that happened, it was impossible to know whether Rumpelstiltskin would apologize or squeeze her harder. No matter what, she was allowed to scream, to weep, to beg him to stop, even if he didn’t stop. Whether his intention was to soothe her or worsen her suffering, he never wanted her to hide her pain.

“What a pretty bum you have,” he said after an application of oil. “And how convenient that it just so happens to already be slick and slippery. Just the way I like it!”

He always fucked her ass on wash day. Belle made herself think the crude words. She had never been given polite phrases for a man entering her there, so she made due with the impolite phrases Rumpelstiltskin had taught her. He wanted her to think these rude words, to speak them freely. As in everything, she tried her best to obey him.

For days afterwards, the fragrance of roses lingered on her skin and in her hair. Every time Belle smelled that scent she felt her knees grow weak with desire. The smell was a reminder of Rumpelstiltskin’s care—and his ownership of every part of her.

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Every day she saw him was a day he took her—on her bench, on the dining room table, on the carpet in front of the fireplace, in his armchair, against a wall. He used every part of her body, favoring her mouth or her cunt only a little bit more than her ass.

He would pleasure her—almost always, he would make her orgasm before they did anything else. He used his mouth or his fingers to reduce her to a quivering mess long before he would take his cock out and fill her.

Throughout all of this, he kept his clothes on when he took her. He never even removed his boots. Belle had caught glimpses of his cock, jutting out from a slit in his leather breeches. But she was never permitted a good look at it. Even when Rumpelstiltskin shoved it in front of her face and demand she put it in her mouth, even then he kept them in darkness or in shadow. He would not allow her to see any part of his body, not even the part that was the most crucial to the terms of their deal.

Meanwhile, Belle had two choices with her apparel: Naked or half-naked. The robe was most useful for her at night, when she could cover herself with it like a blanket and retain a little bit of her body’s warmth. Or if she was by herself in the castle, she felt more civilized having something to wear over her own skin. It was better than wandering around unclothed like some kind of barbarian. Sometimes Rumpelstiltskin fucked her while she was still wearing it, but usually he liked to have her exposed.

If she had ever doubted that the robe was magical, a few weeks of constantly wearing it had proved her wrong. It never got dirty. Nothing that spilled on the silk stained. It never smelled or felt grimy
against Belle’s skin. The blue and gold silk never lost its vibrancy or looked as though it had been worn at all. It was just as beautiful as it had been the day he’d given it to her.

****

Rumpelstiltskin took tea every day. The chipped cup was always on the tray, but Belle never served it to him. He had all but ordered her not to, told her that if she ever did he would fly into a rage and punish her severely. Even though Belle had become more accustomed to the punishments the Dark One dolled out, she had no desire to test him. She gave him tea in the unchipped cup, with three sugars and lots of cream.

While he drank, she would usually perform for him. Sometimes they played the wobble game, when he would make her pose and keep track of every time she moved. There was what he called the poetry game, when he would give her a verse to read while he had tea. If she could memorize the entire thing and recite it to him without error, then she would get a reward. That hadn’t happened yet, and Belle had the bruises to prove it.

It should have bothered her, that Rumpelstiltskin enjoyed hurting her. That had been the aspect of their deal that she had most dreaded. But that was before she knew what it meant to be on the other side of Rumpelstiltskin’s particular desires.

How could she describe it without sounding mad? Sometimes Belle imagined talking to her old friends about her life now. How could she tell sweet Jeanne and practical Mathilde that the highlight of her days were those times when the Dark One pretended to be angry with her and took that fury out on her body? How could she explain the thrill she got from being at his mercy? How could she say out loud that she carried the pain in her back and bottom around with her as though they were tokens of esteem? It was madness to tell them how safe she felt when he was hurting her. How could a normal person understand?

Rumpelstiltskin was never actually angry during the pain games. He didn’t care if she wobbled or stammered or failed at whatever other impossible task he devised. Her behavior didn’t matter, it was just an excuse to hurt her. That was freeing for Belle, to have punishment without a crime. She had done nothing wrong, he was just doing this because he wanted to. She could feel the release of suffering without the damage of any real guilt.

“This isn’t a punishment,” he said one day while she was naked and locked across the dining room table. “How can I punish a whore who never disobeys me?”

She was good, she had been good all her life. But pain still happened. She was still small and vulnerable before the powers of the world.

“I’m hurting my whore because it’s fun!”

And that was the beautiful lie of this game: that the pain had meaning, that it benefited anyone. Belle could allow herself to be hurt as long as she had the knowledge that Rumpelstiltskin took real pleasure in hurting her. In this way, they could make sense out of the chaos that was life.

“Stretch out, little slut, and relax. That will make the impact hurt more.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle’s voice was small and muffled by the table.

If there was any aspect of this game that she didn’t like, it was the odd effect it had on her voice. Already she could hear herself become high-pitched and breathy. Later, she knew she would fumble
over her words or she would babble or fall silent altogether. When Rumpelstiltskin hurt her body, her mind detached from her mouth.

He hit a solid smack onto her thighs. Belle yelped--more in surprise than pain--and tensed her muscles.

“I said relax !” he growled into her ear, holding her throat from behind.

“I’m sorry!” Belle closed her eyes against the sudden tears. This game made it embarrassingly easy to cry. Sometimes that was the best part, to feel uninhibited, to set her emotions free even as her body was bound.

“Try it again,” he said darkly.

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.” She took one deep breath. Then another. She tried to force the air from her mouth down through her body. The relaxation traveled through her flesh to the exposed cheeks that Rumpelstiltskin brushed his nails against possessively.

When she was relaxed, he hit her again. She couldn’t stop her body from tensing as it happened, but she made muscles ease more quickly this time.

He hit her again without warning, then scraped his long fingernails over her cheeks--pain on top of pain.

Belle let out a sound and even she couldn’t say if it was a moan or a cry.

He was so calm, so calculating as he hurt her. In the moments when she could think, Belle was certain that this was deliberate. He was holding himself back, intentionally keeping himself from hurting her even one measure more than she could stand.

Belle had some idea of what Rumpelstiltskin was like when he lost control. She had seen the destroyed room, after all, the fist-sized holes in the stone. Sometimes when he fucked her, he was more intense, more heated, more desperate. But she had never seen him lose his self-command entirely.

No matter what he did to her, he was always a step removed. What would it be to face the Dark One’s full wrath? Or even his full lust? Could a person experience that and live to tell about it? Legends told that no-one could look at the gods without dying or going mad. Perhaps that was why Rumpelstiltskin kept himself hidden from her.

After the violence had ended, Rumpelstiltskin always cared for Belle. He would hold her in his arms and tell her how wonderful she’d been, how pleased he was with her. How she was good, she was precious, she was his. This was Belle’s favorite version of him. Gentle, tender, a little silly and very sweet.

Did she let him beat her just to have this part of him?

But Belle enjoyed who she was during these times as well. In these soft moments after the harsh intensity of the games, she also became giggly and sweetly foolish. She liked the freedom of being direct in her desires. She could tell Rumpelstiltskin that she wanted to sit or stand or lie with him on the plush carpet--and he would give her what she wanted. There was nothing to think about in these blissful after-moments. Belle had no worries, no cares, no questions. She was like a boat that had navigated stormy seas and unknown waters for endless weeks--but now she was docked at a safe harbor, allowed to float in a peaceful bay.
“I’m going out today,” he told her one morning after breakfast.

“So you’re not just wearing your coat to keep off the cold?” Belle’s breath showed in the dungeon air.

He grinned at her. “Oh are you chilled, little one? Perhaps I can spare a few moments to warm you up before I make my departure.”

Then he walked up to Belle, who was perched on the bench in her robe, and wrapped his spiky black coat over her head and shoulders. In the darkness of his clothes, she was surrounded by the warmth of him, the smell of him. Without being ordered, she opened her mouth and slid his cock between her lips.

Hidden under layers of fabric, Belle enjoyed the feeling of being close to him, of touching him. Even if her hands were locked to the bench, she could rub her face up and down the length of his cock. It almost felt like she was nuzzling him.

His hands were on the back of her head, but he didn’t control her this time. He held her close, wrapped her up in his scaly black leather. Like the wings of a dragon, Belle thought. A dragon cradling its treasure.

She had gotten better at pleasuring him with her mouth. It was still a daunting task to fit all of him inside her and she still always broke away when he spurted into her mouth—but she was getting better. She licked and sucked, like he had taught her. She trailed kisses along the shaft and rubbed her tongue against the smooth head. She hollowed her cheeks and heard him groan.

Before he came, Rumpelstiltskin pulled away from her, taking the warmth and the darkness with him. Belle winced at the light and the cold and she missed her chance to see him as he orgasmed. When she opened her eyes, he was collected and calm—though his eyes did shine and he smiled at her.

Aside from that, the only signs of his pleasure were the ache in Belle’s jaw and a single drop of glistening black fluid on the floor.

Belle took a breath and wiped her mouth. “How long will you be gone?”

“I’ll be back before your next feeding.” He reached out to pat her on the cheek, then turned to leave.

Belle stood up from the bench to follow him. “What shall I do while you’re gone?” She had never been alone in the castle before. Was safe to be here without him?

“You may do whatever you like, my girl. The cuffs will be your chaperone. But!” he held up a finger to her. “If you can find the orange drawing room, there is a surprise there waiting for you.”

“What’s the surpr--” Belle began to ask, but he had already vanished in a puff of smoke.

Alright then. At least now she didn’t have to hear him mock her about the futility of asking what a surprise was going to be.
So. The orange drawing room. There were hundreds of rooms in this castle. Her previous explorations hadn’t even covered a tenth of its magnitude. She would have to get going.

She spent that day poking her head into bedrooms and antechambers and galleries. The cuffs didn’t keep her out of any room as they had the angry room at the foot of Rumpelstiltskin’s tower. She hadn’t found any other rooms like that, nothing so ruined and demolished. None of the rooms seemed lived in at all. Most rooms in the castle held no trace of Rumpelstiltskin, no hint of who he was or how he had lived before her arrival.

Well, there was one hint: There were almost no mirrors in the castle at all. She could see where they were supposed to be--see the empty spaces above dressing tables or the broken frames of hand mirrors. Once or twice, Belle had found grand, full-length mirrors on stands or built into the walls. Perhaps those were too large to be removed. They were all covered with heavy cloths. Did Rumpelstiltskin really think himself so ugly that he couldn’t look at his own face?

It was late afternoon when Belle found a room that could only properly be described as “the orange drawing room.” It was a small room by the standards of this castle, but Belle thought of it as cozy. There was just enough space for a small couch, a cluster of upholstered armchairs, and a few end tables. The furniture was all velvet, colored a deep, russet orange. The fireplace had been lit before Belle even opened the door, so the room was full of warmth and cheer. The walls were paneled in dark brown wood, the same kind that lined Rumpelstiltskin’s tower. On the floor, the carpet was a brighter orange than the chairs--the color of marigolds.

Where was her surprise? There was nothing on the center table, nor in any of the drawers. He had said there would be something in the room, hadn’t he? Not just that the room was the surprise.

It was a lovely room, of course. Every room that had walls and a fireplace was a paradise to Belle. But this room seemed especially comfortable and inviting.

Dreamily, Belle sighed onto the couch, thinking of the hours she could spend in the soft cushion--what was that?

There was something hard in the couch cushions. It dug into Belle’s back. Twisting around, Belle pulled away at the cushions until she found the offending object.

It was the book. The copper-colored book Rumpelstiltskin had allowed her to read. The color had blended in to the couch so that Belle would have never noticed it if she hadn’t sat down.

She touched the copper silk reverently, brushing her fingers against the light-and-dark snakes that decorated the cover. She could read more of it now, this story that never ended. She could see what happened next!

With no reason to hide her joy, Belle beamed and settled in to the couch, reading until Rumpelstiltskin came back.

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There were also days he would spend spinning. He usually warned her of his plans the night before. Or else he would wake her in darkness and make sure she was fed and cared for before he began his work at sunrise.
Belle would spend those days much as she did they days when he was gone. As the evening drew near she would wander up to his tower, ready to spend time with him when he could give her some attention.

It was hard to talk to him while he spun. He was so focused on his thread, on his work, that he had no thoughts to spare for Belle. Sometimes she would ask him questions and his answers were disjointed, distracted. He didn’t seem to know what he was saying while he spun. Having him physically near but mentally distant was somehow worse than when he left the castle altogether.

****

Every night, Belle would go to her cell and touch her female places. At first, she didn’t think of Rumpelstiltskin. Her mind went to familiar territory, the terrible men who might have been her husbands. Eventually, however, she began to imagine what Rumpelstiltskin would do if he happened to witness her hypothetical wedding nights.

She imagined him in the room of her bridal chamber, invisible to her husband, watching some old man press her onto a bed. She imagined his anger at seeing her so poorly cared for; she imagined his desire to rescue her from this drudgery and show her what true pleasure was. She imagined Rumpelstiltskin touching his cock while he looked at her, she could imagine his desire and his fury growing more and more urgent until he reached a breaking point and pushed her husband off of her and took her like an animal until she screamed.

More and more, she orgasmed to the image of his face.

****

“Time for your potion!” Rumpelstiltskin said one morning as he woke her.

Belle shivered as she rose from the bench. “What potion?”

“Don’t you remember, my dear?” he held out a goblet for her to take. “Every month when the moon is full?” He let the phrase hang in the air, waiting for her to finish it.

“My womb will be empty,” Belle completed the sentence, the promise he had made her so long ago.

She took the cup and looked into it. Last time she hadn’t seen the potion, only tasted it and felt its warmth. Everything had been black that first night, dark and unknown and terrifying. But now it was morning. Rumpelstiltskin was not the Dark One, not to her, not anymore. She knew more of what to expect from him. She knew what her life was to be.

The potion in her hand was an opaque white, like milk. It steamed, and the heat was comforting. She drank and felt the warmth fill her.

A month. How could it have been only a month? How was it possible that a month ago she had been a maiden, set to marry a handsome young man? How could her life have changed so completely in the span of only a moon’s turn?
It had been a month since she had slept in a bed or eaten at a table--or spoken to anyone besides Rumpelstiltskin. Strange that she wasn’t more lonely, that she spend her days in sorrow for the life she had lost.

In the beginning, her solace had been the knowledge that her people were safe. The friends and family she would never see again would go on to lead full and hopefully happy lives. In the miserable confusion of her first days, her only certainty was that the Dark One had kept his word: the ogres were gone. He had saved them and she was paying the price.

But now she felt no need for solace. It was good that her loved ones were safe, of course. And she still loved them and thought of them fondly. But she didn’t miss them. Her cousins, her companions… they had no place in this new way of life, not even in Belle’s head.

Perhaps it was shame. How could she explain to Little Claude or the village girl Alix that she wasn’t ever going to be married? How could she tell Jeanne and Mathilde that her days with Rumpelstiltskin were more satisfying in every way than life could have ever been with Gaston? How could she even let the thoughts of these innocents exist in the same place as the Dark One? Pushing them from her mind was a kindness to everyone involved.

She wasn’t ashamed of the deal she had made. She enjoyed more of her life than she would have ever imagined. If she had changed so much in one month, how much more would she change in the months to come?
The Ailment

Chapter Summary

Belle gets sick and Rumple gets excited.

Chapter Notes

Friends, this is where the sex slave AU gets a little dub-conny. This chapter contains non-consensual orgasms and the threat and fear of violence (also non-consensual.) Does it help if I tell you it's a plot point?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a sunny morning, perhaps one of the last fine days before autumn fell into a dreary pattern of rain and clouds and snow. At home, it was a time for cidering apples, for butchering hogs, for making repairs to the homesteads and preparing the farms for winter. One of the last days a person could comfortably spend outside until spring. Perhaps in the evening there would be a bonfire, people would tell stories and sing songs.

It was a beautiful day, but in her dungeon, Belle was utterly miserable. The night before, she had gone to bed with a tickle in her throat. This morning, she felt as though she had been trampled by a herd of ill-tempered goats.

“You look as though you want to die,” Rumpelstiltskin observed when he came to wake her. He didn’t seem upset by the fact, merely curious.

“I do,” Belle croaked. She buried her face in her pillow, but moving made her cough. The coughing had kept her awake all night, the coughing and the shivering and the aching. She didn’t get up to kneel at his feet, but stayed curled up in her robe with her eyes squeezed shut.

“Well you can’t.” His hand was on her face, feeling her cheek and her forehead. “My whore isn’t allowed to die until I’m done with her. Is that clear?”

Belle tried to smile. “Yes, Rumple.” She was too tired to say his whole name.

“Can you look at me, Belle?”

Rubbing away the gunk that had crusted over her eyelids, Belle blinked into wakefulness. Her first sight was his face. His head tilted to the side, looking at her with something like concern. Belle blinked again, slowly. It was hard to focus. He crouched on the ground beside her, eye level with her on the bench. She could hear the squeak of his leather breeches when he moved.

“Good morning,” he said softly. He wasn’t smiling, but his face was gentle.


“Can you sit up, little sickling?”
Shaking her head on the pillow, Belle whimpered, “Don’t want to.”

“Please?”

It was not a word she heard from him often. Rumpelstiltskin was a man of commands, not requests. He could order her to move at any time. The cuffs would jerk her body into whatever position he liked. But he had asked. He had said *please*.

With more effort than she would have ever imagined being necessary, Belle pushed herself up to sit on the bench, her legs still stretched out in front of her. Trembling, she leaned against the rough stone wall. The cold bit into her skin but she was too sick to move away, too weak to support herself. Blearily, she opened her eyes to look at Rumpelstiltskin.

“Good girl,” he breathed.

Groaning, Belle rocked her head back and forth until it hurt. “Not good,” she muttered. “I can’t be good for you, not today.”

“I know.” He reached out to her, his hands gliding over her cheeks and eyelids, running down her throat and resting on her chest. Even this tender touch was agony, fire on top of fire. Belle’s flesh was hot and cold, everything hurt. Rumpelstiltskin left one hand on the space between her breasts. The heat of his skin made her cough again.

Standing up from his crouching position, Rumpelstiltskin kept his hand on Belle’s chest while her body hacked and shook. He scooted her forward and sat down behind her, wrapping her up in his arms. Belle burrowed into his warmth, tears in her eyes by the time the fit had passed.

“My poor thing.” Rumpelstiltskin rubbed warmth into her arms. “You pitiful creature.”

His voice was not as sympathetic as his words. Through the haze of her exhaustion and her pain, Belle could hear how smug he sounded, how superior. He was enjoying this, as if it were of his games.

“Rumple,” Belle’s mouth was dry, her throat full of thorns. “Did you do this? To me?”

He squeezed her shoulders. “No, my dear. Your own sweet body is hurting you more than I would yet dare—more than I would dream you could handle.”

“I can’t,” she moaned. “I can’t handle this, I hate it!” She coughed again, a dry cough that pounded through her and left her ribs aching. She let out a high-pitched whine. Somehow, that helped. Rumpelstiltskin held her gently while her body convulsed in misery.

“You need to eat,” he said evenly. “I don’t believe in starving colds.” He waved his hand and the breakfast tray was sitting on Belle’s knees.

It was a bowl of soup. Savory chicken broth and green leaves. Belle leaned over the tray and took in the mouth-watering aroma. The steam made it easier to breathe, soothed her tired eyes and aching head. She balanced the tray on her legs and bent over to put her face to the bowl.

Could she dunk her head into the hot, salty brew? Could she cover her whole body with this comfort? Could she ask Rumpelstiltskin to conjure a tub full of soup? Would that help? Would he give it to her, if she asked?

She didn’t ask. She kept her face clean as she drank down the broth and lapped up the chicken and vegetables.
“Good girl,” Rumpelstiltskin said softly when she finished. His fingers traced lines in the pattern on the back of her robe. “Do you feel better?”

Belle nodded. “A little.”

He made a noise and his hands moved to comb her hair.

At his first touch, Belle flinched and pulled away. “No,” she whimpered. “No, it hurts!” Everything hurt. Even having him touch her hair hurt. She knew he was gentle but she couldn’t stand it, not now. Not while she was so miserable.

But then she realized what she had done.

He had claimed a special ownership of her hair. Touching it, combing it, tending to it—those where his tasks, things only he was allowed to do, things he wanted to do. He combed her hair every morning. But now Belle was telling him not to. How could she? How did she dare? Would the Dark One allow her to make such a demand?

“I’m sorry!” Fresh tears burst into Belle’s eyes, streaming down her face. “I’m sorry, Rumpelstiltskin. I-I don’t mean to deny you. But it hurts.” She swallowed a sob and covered her face with her hands. She took a breath. “I didn’t know it was possible for hair to hurt.”

Rumpelstiltskin just patted her curls softly and moved his hands away. He turned her around to face him, both of his hands cupping the sides of her face. “My little thing,” he said gently, “you are in need of repair.”

Belle blinked. He wasn’t angry. The tears soothed her eyes but made her nose run. She sniffled. “What…” she had to pause to think of words. “What do you want me to do?”

He put a hand over hers. “How far can you walk?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can even stand.”

“Don’t worry,” he hopped off the bench. “I’ll help you!”

He could order the cuffs to make her stand, Belle knew. He could order them to pull her or drag her anywhere in the castle—maybe anywhere in the world. But he would help her, if she couldn’t walk under her own power. He would help her.

Standing was a trial. Belle felt lightheaded and weak. The soup sat heavily in her belly, throwing her off balance. She took slow, shuffling steps to the cell door. Rumpelstiltskin followed her.

“In your travels through my castle, have you come upon a pea-green bedchamber? It’s in the western side, not far from the tower where I spin.”

Belle closed her eyes and leaned in the door frame. She had found a forest green parlor, and a grass-green room. But not a pea-green bedroom. “No,” she managed to say.

“I’ve always found green to be the color for things that disgust me. It’s ideal for a sick room, don’t you think?”

She just looked at him, wavering on her feet.

He waved off her bewilderment. “Never mind. I’ll show you the way, it’s not far.”

It was too far. Belle took five steps before she had to stop and lean against a wall to gain some
strength back. In the same time, Rumpelstiltskin went ahead twenty paces and then came back to hurry her along. She took two more steps and had to stop again.

“Just order me,” she said through chapped lips. “Let the cuffs drag me. I can’t walk, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He scoffed. “You don’t get to say when and how I order you about, girl.”

Belle nodded, and began to walk again. After three steps, she felt herself lifted up off the ground. For a moment, she thought it was magic. But then she recognized the steady gait of walking, and felt the strong arms holding her at the knees and around her shoulders. She hadn’t been lifted, she was being carried.

Rumple was holding her, taking her to their destination.

Belle lay her head in the crook of his neck and melted into his chest. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Thank my impatience, you dawdler. If I let you walk, it would take all day.”

“Do I need to hold on?” She made to wrap her arms around his neck.

He shook his head. “Save your strength, little one. I can manage a tiny creature like you.”

Belle rested while he carried her, and listened to his heart beat.

The door opened without Rumpelstiltskin turning the handle. It was a small room they entered, and not a pleasant one. From the edges of the drawn curtains, Belle could see sunlight trying to poke in, but the room was mostly in gray shadows. This was just as well because the plaster walls were painted an ugly pale green—not the color of peas, but the color of puss. Had this been the bedroom of a person who disgusted him?

But it wasn’t a dungeon and that alone made Belle marvel. The windows in this room could shut! There was a fire burning in the grate! There was a bed in the center of the room! The olive-green coverlet was already turned down and Rumpelstiltskin slid her bare feet in between the blankets.

“A bed!” Belle sighed. “Do I really get a bed?”

“Invalids get special treatment.” He helped her settle into the bed, arranging pillows around her head so she could sit up or lie down as she needed to. He pulled the blankets and coverlet up to her chin. Belle closed her eyes and let him fuss over her. “You’ll be back in the dungeon tomorrow when you’re better.”

Belle blinked. “Will I be better tomorrow?”

“Of course you will, my dear. I’ll make sure of it.”

“With magic?”

He placed a kiss on her forehead. Didn’t he mind the sheen of sweat that covered her brow? Didn’t she repulse him in this state? “May I use magic on you, my sweet? May I make a potion to make you feel well again?”

“Yes,” Belle whispered. “I don’t want to be sick. I don’t like it.”

He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. His eyes gleamed and he clutched her fingers. “There will be a price,” he said. “Will you pay it?”
“What is the price?”

He rubbed his thumb against her cheek, brushing the bone with the hard edge of his long fingernail. “The price is that you must come for me. The cure won’t work if you don’t.”

Sinking back into the pillows, Belle closed her eyes. “That’s a funny way to cure a sickness.”

He brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. “It is a funny little spell. I’ve never had the opportunity to use it before.”

“Mm,” Belle let her head loll on her shoulders, too weary to say more.

“Rest for now, my girl. I’ll rouse you when the time is right.”

“You mean you’ll fuck me.” Illness and exhaustion loosened her tongue. It was almost like how she was after a game, when the pain pounded in her head so loudly she couldn’t hear her thoughts until she spoke them.

Rumpelstiltskin tutted. “That’s a dirty word for a lady to know. Who taught you such shocking language?”

Belle smiled and poked at his chest. He took her fingers and kissed them before he left.

The warmth of the room and comfort of the bed should have made it easy for her to sleep, but she was still too miserable. Her nose was clogged and she couldn’t breathe through it. She would suffer coughing fits and then shake with fever. The fever made her sweat, which made her want to take the blankets off, but when she did she became cold again. The mattress was so soft, but after a month of sleeping on a bench, Belle couldn’t rest on feathers.

But she tried to keep her eyes closed, and her body still. She did what she could to rest, even if sleep refused to claim her. Briefly, she thought of touching herself—in the hopes that an orgasm would push her body to a true exhaustion. But she was aching in her legs and arms, so the thought of moving her body even that much was painful. She curled up into herself and moaned through the pain as best she could.

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When Rumpelstiltskin returned, he was in a merry mood. “It has been too long!” he declared as he bounded into the sickroom. “Far too long since the last time I got to properly experiment with new magic!”

Rolling over, Belle squinted out of her drowsiness. “What?” Sickness had made her voice so deep and hoarse she could barely recognize it as her own.

“How miserable you look!” he cackled, his broken teeth making a nightmare of his smile.

Eyes closed, Belle nodded. “I want to sleep for a hundred years.”

Rumpelstiltskin giggled. “Be thankful I loaned that spell to a friend and never got it back! No, sweet slut, I will cure you faster than rest or herbs or any other mortal method! Are you ready to start?”

In her sickness, Belle was ready to die. Any other activity would only make things worse. And he
wanted to take her. He wanted to make her come, when the thought of sitting up in bed was enough to overwhelm her.

But he was so excited. He wanted this. He wanted to cure her, wanted to be with her. She couldn’t spoil his fun. And besides, it was in their deal: He could take her at any time.

She had to give him what he wanted.

“Do you really want me?” she whimpered. It was as much noise as she could make. “Even when I’m like this?”

“Oh Belle,” his nose crinkled in delight as he looked at her. “You know I like to see you wretched!”

“You need me to come,” she said. “But I don’t think I’ll be able to get any pleasure today. I’m so sweaty and grumpy and I’m shaking!” Belle held her arms over her chest and tried not to sob.

Gently, slowly, but in a way that brooked no argument, Rumpelstiltskin took Belle’s wrists in his hands and pulled her arms away from her chest.

“This is going to hurt you.” Her open robe exposed her breasts and Belle could see him looking at them. “And I dearly want to see you hurting. But I will give you pleasure too. Your pleasure will eclipse your pain like the moon covering the sun. And then I will give you the cure and you will be right as rain! And, in between your pain and your curing, I will take great pleasure for myself.”

Did he see the gooseflesh that covered her chest, even in this warm room? Did he see the sheen of sweat that coated her like a greased pig? Did he notice that her breath was shaky? That her lungs were heavy with phlegm and her ribs ached from coughing?

Or did he just see a nice pair of tits?

“Your pleasure,” his voice was deep, his eyes glinted, “is my concern.”

Why did that sound like a threat?

He pulled the blankets off her body and eased her out of her robe. When she was naked, he looked at her for a long moment. Again, Belle wondered what he saw. Wasn’t she a pale, weakened, unclean wretch? What part of that appealed to him?

He got into bed with her, fully clothed and with his boots still on. He faced her, his hands reaching out to touch her arms and sides.

It felt perverse to lie with him in a bed. There was a wrongness to it that didn’t exist when he was plowing her on the table or making her suck him in her cell. Beds had a purpose. They were for sleeping. They were for married couples, or mothers with their children, or sisters and close friends—or even for lovers who met in secret—but not for a prisoner and her captor. For her to be in a bed with Rumpelstiltskin while wearing the cuffs that marked her subjugation—it felt like an insult to all the good and lawful things that might happen in a bed.

His hand stroked along her upper arm and he seemed to delight in her gooseflesh. He kept going, touching her belly and her breasts. And though his caress was delicate, Belle’s body shivered with pain.

“I hate this,” she confessed.

“I know.” His breath was hot against her ear. He pressed his cock against her and she could feel how
much he loved her pain.

A cough clamoured out of Belle’s lungs and she turned away to hack and wheeze. There was phlegm in her mouth by the time she could breathe again. Out of spite, she spat it at Rumpelstiltskin. “Is that what you want?” she snapped. “Does that excite you? My disease, my misery, my uncleanness— is that what gives you pleasure today?”

“It will do.” In the gray darkness, she couldn’t see his face. His voice was deep and he could have been angry or amorous.

He could have been both, for all Belle knew.

“Get on your back,” he ordered and the cuffs flipped her over. Her hands were free to move, but he was on top of her and there was no thought of escape.

He put his mouth on her face, lapping up the sickness sweat with his tongue. Revulsion swept over Belle and she almost gagged when he kissed her on the mouth. He went to her breasts after that, sucking and biting at her nipples until the pain rose up to nearly drown her. She gasped and cried, but even to her own ears it sounded like pleasure.

At this point there was too much happening and Belle was too weakened to know if there was a difference between pain and pleasure anymore. It was all sensation—the way a battlefield is all noise and both victory and defeat are synonymous with blood. There was no winning this war in her body, only surviving it.

When Rumpelstiltskin touched her between the legs she was wet. How was that possible? How could she feel desire now? Perhaps her secret places knew what her mind had just realized: The only way for this to be easy was for her to make it easy. She must not resist, must only endure. She must give Rumpelstiltskin what he wanted. She must be good, must be obedient, must indulge whatever whims and fancies he devised.

The tears in her eyes made her feel better, made her eyes feel less dry and tired. Rumpelstiltskin had his head between her legs now and she tried to keep her mind on how good that felt.

It was good, even if it was exhausting. Her muscles hated the tension of desire, the holding force of it. It would have been so much easier if he wasn’t pleasuring her. But the pleasure itself was pleasant. She made herself think that. At any other time, it would have been lovely to lie in a bed on soft pillows with Rumpelstiltskin making her come.

As it was, her nose was running and she couldn’t breathe without feeling a bubble of snot on her nostril.

“I don’t like this,” she whispered, but he didn’t hear her. How could he? His ears were pressed against her thighs, his attention devoted entirely to exploring her secret places with his tongue.

She tried to force herself to enjoy it, tried to bring to mind the terrible things that brought her pleasure when she touched herself. The very scenario she was in could have been one of her fantasies.

After all, her husband wouldn’t care if she was sick. He would take what was his! Weak or coughing or belching bile, as long as she could lie on her back he would have her! Didn’t it pleasure her to think of her body being used for a man’s enjoyment? Wasn’t it arousing to imagine his desire for her, no matter how wretched she looked or felt? Why should Belle expect anyone to care about her well being?

But Rumpelstiltskin was supposed to be different.
She couldn’t say where she had gotten the idea. Perhaps it had been as early as the first night, the first orgasm he had given her. She would have never had that from a husband. Or perhaps it was the games and how tender he was with her afterward. There was so much about Rumpelstiltskin that made him superior to any ordinary man. But now he had stooped to the level of the sort of man she was supposed to marry. Why did that feel like a betrayal?

“Stop.” Belle said, no more loudly than a breath. He wasn’t going to stop, but she had to say it anyway. For her own sanity, she had to say the words, even knowing that they would be ignored.

Intent on his work, Rumpelstiltskin swirled his tongue around her pleasure spot. Belle felt her back arch and her toes curl and her muscles protested even as they spasmed.

“No,” Belle whimpered as her body shook and she felt her heat leak out from between her legs. “Please, no more.”

“Did you say something?” The Dark One’s grin rose into her vision like a evil sunrise.

She closed her eyes against her tears. “It doesn’t matter,” she said dully.

Crawling up over her, Rumpelstiltskin wiped his mouth on Belle’s face. She could feel his salvia and her wetness meet with her phlegm and her sweat and her tears.

He kissed her then, slowly and tenderly. “Good girl.” His voice shook. “We’re halfway done.”

Belle nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She didn’t even want to ask what the second part was, what else he was going to do to her. She would find out all too soon.

“Sit up, my sweet,” he ordered, and the cuffs pulled her. He ordered her without thinking now. He must be done with coaxing and cajoling her to obey him.

He stood over her on the bed, his cock at the ready. Belle knew that if she put him in her mouth she would have to breathe through her stuffed-up nose. Belle also knew that at this point there was no argument to be had.

She braced her hands on his boots. How long until he made her kiss them again, made her thank him for the gift of this cure?

He held her by the back of her head and slowly guided his cock into her mouth. She let him. She sat on the bed and kept her mouth open wide, her jaw slack like some sort of dullard. He controlled her motions and Belle was glad to be spared the effort.

Breathing through her mouth all day had made it dry. She could feel her tongue scratching against his manhood. Didn’t he mind? Did he like that feeling? Did he notice at all?

He was shaking, Belle could feel it. As he slowly pushed in and out of her mouth, his hands and legs quaked. He moaned and grabbed clumps of her hair into his fist. If she wanted to breathe she had to blow the snot out of her nose. It was a disgusting business, but then again so was everything at this point. Everything that had happened since they had entered this puss-green room was revolting.

He came quickly. When it was time, he pulled Belle away from his cock. Seed spurted onto her face, but not in her mouth.

“Good girl,” he said, holding her face up to look at him. She could imagine his black semen contrasting with the yellow-white snot on her nose, mixing together with her tears and her sweat and her wetness. She must look hideous. “You’re so beautiful.” He waved one finger over her face
and she was clean. Everything that had hurt her today was contained in a glass vial Rumpelstiltskin held in his hand. “Will you sleep now, little thing?”

Belle didn’t even nod. She rolled away from him and let the darkness take her.

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It was nighttime when he woke her. Belle was still naked, still drenched in sweat, and still shivering despite the blankets.

“Ready to feel better, my sickling?”

She heard his cheerful voice in the darkness, saw the black outline of him against the orange light of the smoldering fire. He held something out to her, and Belle took it.

The thing was cold, that was Belle’s first impression. Beads of condensation covered it. And it was smooth and hard--a bottle, with a stopper in the top.

“Your restorative,” Rumpelstiltskin announced grandly. “Drink every drop and you’ll find it worth the price.”

“I hope so,” Belle said as she pulled out the stopper. “I didn’t like paying it.”

“What?” his voice went flat, but Belle didn’t answer. She drank the potion in one swig and many gulps, like a young man at his ale.

It was the most confusing medicine Belle had ever taken. For all that the bottle had been cold, the drink itself was as warm as tea. Then on the second gulp it was cool as river water. The taste of it changed too: By turns it was salty, sour, and sweet. She could taste broth--hot and nourishing--and fruits--cool and refreshing. As she reached the end of the bottle, Belle felt that she was drinking the warmth of the sun and the clarity of the sky all at once.

“Tell me what you said,” Rumpelstiltskin ordered as soon as she had removed the bottle from her lips. “About the price--say it again.”

Too sick to be afraid, Belle told the truth. “I didn’t like coming tonight. I didn’t want to do it. I told you I wouldn’t want to.”

“And I made you anyway.” His voice was strange, strangled. As though the words were choking him. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected when a monster takes a maiden for a mate!” That sentence was a growl, a snarling rumble that seemed to come not just from his mouth, but from his whole being.

“It never happened before,” Belle said. Was she trying to reassure him or herself? “You’ve never… forced me to do anything.”

The anger, the darkness, whatever part of Rumpelstiltskin it was that spat and hissed and roared--it had taken him over. His clawed hand gripped around Belle’s throat and she had to gasp for breath. “But I always could, dearie,” he snarled. “I could have raped you from the beginning and given you nothing in return!”
“I know.” Belle forced herself to stay still, to not let fear make her panic and do something stupid. Rumpelstiltskin was not in control of himself, so she had to stay alert. He had promised he would never break her. “You still can. You can hurt me however you like. I can’t do anything to stop you, Rumpelstiltskin. I’m too weak.”

The grip around her throat tightened and Belle felt herself go rigid. Her body tensed, waiting for an attack.

But it never came.

The hand at her neck went away, but she could still hear Rumpelstiltskin’s breathing. It was labored, panting, as though he were carrying some heavy load.

“You are weak,” his voice rasped in the darkness. “You are nothing! Now, fuck your ungrateful cunt and go to sleep.”

The door slammed when he departed, and Belle was left alone, safe for now but dreading what would come next.

Chapter End Notes

Life advice: If your partner gets mad at themselves because they did something to your body that you didn't like, and then they take their anger out on you, they are not living their best life, and don't deserve you. Doesn't matter if they've found a cure for the common cold, that shit isn't cool. Respect yourselves, fam. <3
The Blood

Chapter Summary

Things reach a breaking point.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for semi-consensual violence, anger and (believe it or not) blood. But this chapter also has a moderately happy ending!

Belle opened her eyes and didn’t want to die. This was a tremendous improvement over the day before. Lying in the narrow bed in the putrid green room, Belle breathed through her nose and rejoiced. She stretched her arms out and her muscles did not ache, her bones did not tremble with fever. She sat up and rubbed her face, finding no grimy residue of sickness.

“I’m well,” she spoke aloud, and her voice was clear and strong. Rumpelstiltskin’s potion had worked. In only one night, she was cured!

But her smile faded when she remembered everything else that had happened last night. The price for this magic had been a orgasm Belle hadn’t wanted to have. Rumpelstiltskin had made her come when she had been too weak to resist. She had agreed to the magic, agreed to the price--but during the act she had faltered. It had hurt her to come and she had asked Rumpelstiltskin to stop, but he hadn’t heard her. He hadn’t stopped.

He had left to make the cure thinking he had pleasured her. Had Belle been wrong to correct him?

But he always wanted to know what she felt, what she wanted, what she liked or hated. She had hated being sick. And she had hated being pleasured. And she had hated how Rumpelstiltskin had thought more about her cunt than any other part of her.

And when she had told him, after it was all done, when she told him that she hadn’t liked what he’d made her body do… That was when he had frightened her. His anger had been palpable, but he had done nothing. The danger of the Dark One was always in his stillness--like a snake coiled or a bowstring drawn back, ready to attack but not there yet.

He hadn’t hurt her last night, even when rage had steamed off of him like mist from a poisonous swamp. He hadn’t hurt her, even though he had wanted to. Did he still want to? Was he just waiting for her to get well before he did it?

His rage would come, Belle knew. The bow would shoot, the snake let loose its venom. That wasn’t a question as far as Belle was concerned. For her, the only uncertainty would be when it would happen, and how she would bear it.

After all, it was her duty to bear it. She had to shoulder the burden of Rumpelstiltskin’s desires. She was the vessel for his lusts and his rages. She had to amuse him, entertain him, give him whatever he
Belle got up out of the bed, thankful that she had the strength to stand. She picked her robe up off the floor and wrapped it around her. She was as dressed as she would ever be. With nothing else to do, Belle made the bed she had slept in and looked around the ugly green room.

She had never been in this room before. It was a simple space, plain. The pale green walls were unadorned, the rug on the floor threadbare. The furniture was cheap and rickety. All major items—the bed, a chest of drawers and a wash stand—were all clearly made in different styles of different materials, but all three were painted the same nauseating green as the walls. Who was important enough to merit their own room, but not worthy of having a space that was pleasant to live in? Perhaps this was the chamber for a governess or a housekeeper, certainly no one of any great honor.

Belle walked over to the windows and tried to open the curtains. They would not pull and when Belle examined them more closely, she found that the bottom of the curtains had been nailed into the wooden window frames. So many rooms in the castle always had the curtains drawn. Were they all nailed in? Was an enchantment not enough to ensure complete darkness? Did Rumpelstiltskin hate the light much that he was unwilling to take a chance?

At least Belle was able to peek out through the sides of the curtains. Through a narrow strip of light, she caught a glimpse of snow-covered mountains and an overcast sky. Patches of blue peeked through the clouds, just as Belle peeped through the curtains. She smiled when she saw those spots of blue. They were hope in the midst of despair.

The doorknob turned.

Heart racing, Belle dashed to the center of the room and fell to her knees. She placed her hands on either side of her on the floor and kept her head bowed. As Rumpelstiltskin entered the room, she could only see his boots—the scaled gray ones that laced up the front.

He leaned against the bed with one ankle crossed over the other foot, observing her. He didn’t speak.

On the floor, Belle dug her fingernails into her palms. Should she go to him? Crawl over and kiss his boots? Would he want her to beg for mercy? Or would he not want her to move? She didn’t dare look up, didn’t want to see the expression on his face.

Belle made herself breathe through her fear. She made herself wait. She let Rumpelstiltskin make the first move.

After an interminable silence, he uncrossed his legs and spoke. “Do you have anything you want to say?” His voice was low and serious.

Slowly, Belle raised her head but kept her eyes lowered. She couldn’t make herself look at him. Not yet. “I feel much better, Rumpelstiltskin. Your cure worked wonders.”

“Would you say it was worth the price?”

Belle flinched at the snarl that was his last word. She breathed. She forced herself to relax.

“Rumpelstiltskin—,” she began, but he cut her off.

“Go to your cell,” he snapped.

The cuffs yanked her to her feet and pulled her through the castle so quickly she had to run to keep up with them. The pull didn’t stop at the cell door. The cuffs dragged her to the far wall and locked
her into the stone with her hands so high above her head she had to stand on her tiptoes. Belle’s back was to the door, her body pressed against the wall.

She let out a shaky breath. Then another. This was new. Rumpelstiltskin had never hurt her in the cell before. Pain games were usually for the dining room, after he had taken tea. That was when it amused him to make up a reason to hurt her.

But this wasn’t a game, was it? His anger wasn’t a pretense this time. He didn’t want to hurt her because it was fun. In this moment, Belle knew, Rumpelstiltskin had much darker motives.

Behind her, she heard his footsteps enter the room. This time she didn’t wait for him to speak.

“Should I beg you for mercy?” She wanted it to be a quip, wanted to show him she wasn’t afraid. But the words came out high-pitched and tremulous. She did not sound brave at all.

“It won’t help,” he said coldly. His hand reached around her waist and he untied the belt of her robe. Without touching her body, he pulled the robe over Belle’s head, covering her hair but exposing her back and her ass.

Hooded now, the warmth of Belle’s breath quickly became stifling. She was isolated now, with the blue silk covering her eyes, muffling her hearing. Her world had shrunk to the two inches between her face and the cloth. Now she had even fewer ways of knowing Rumpelstiltskin, his moods or his temper. And with no way to gauge him, she had no hint of what her punishment would be. How bad it would be.

She thought she heard him take a few steps backwards. Was he looking at her body? Admiring the bruises and welts he’d already left there? Looking at the places on her that were still unmarked? Was he thinking of what he would do next? Or did he already know?

“Please,” she spoke up, disregarding his warning. “Please, Rumpelstiltskin just talk to--”

He cut her off, not with a word, but with a sharp burst of pain on her shoulder. Belle cried out at the shock of it, the bright fire that seared itself into her consciousness even before she registered the physical sensation.

He waited. Belle tried to imagine what he was waiting for. What did he looking at her body? Admiring the bruises and welts he’d already left there? Looking at the places on her that were still unmarked? Was he thinking of what he would do next? Or did he already know?

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He waited. Belle tried to imagine what he was waiting for. What did he want from her? What was he hitting her with? When would he hit her again? She breathed. The second lash was worse than the first because she knew what to expect. A yelp ripped its way out of her throat and she felt the pain tears gather under her eyelids.

Again, he waited. Even now, he was letting her breathe. Of course, she knew that trick, didn’t she? Relax, because that will make the pain worse when it comes.

“Will you speak to me?” she whimpered. She could endure pain, but the silence, the unknowable mystery of this man—that was unbearable.

In answer, Rumpelstiltskin gave her another strike. This one she felt in the center of her back, a long, white-hot stripe against her spine.

After a few more blows, Belle heard a crack in the air above her head. That was when she realized what the new instrument he was using to hurt her. It was a whip. He was whipping her.

But still he would not speak.
“Please!” she shouted over the sound of her pain. “Please, Rumpelstiltskin! I just want--”

“Isn’t it obvious by now?” At last he broke his silence, lashing her to emphasize his words. “I don’t care about what you want!” The strikes came faster now, every word a new pain until Belle’s back was a wall of fire. “I don’t give a damn about you!”

Roughly, he pressed his body against her back. The sudden contact made Belle’s vision go white with pain and she sobbed. Her legs were useless but the cuffs held her up to the wall.

“You’re nothing!” Rumpelstiltskin moved to growl into the silk that covered her. “You are my thing!” He was hitting her ass now, bringing the flat of his hand down on the same spot over and over. “I bought you, you whore! And I will use you! And fuck you! And hurt you until I kill you if that’s what I want!” He pulled the crumpled robe away from Belle’s head, freeing her. “Do you understand?” He punctuated the last word with a strike, grabbing her reddened flesh, digging his claws into her skin.

When he pulled the robe away, it was as though Belle could truly breathe for the first time. The cold dungeon air was bracing, it shocked her awake. After a moment, she looked over at Rumpelstiltskin. He was staring at her. His whole body quivered but not a muscle moved on his face. He was looking at her. He had asked her a question. He wanted an answer.

“Yes,” she breathed. Then she breathed again. Every breath was another moment to clear her head. “Yes, I understand. I am your thing, Rumpelstiltskin.”

His expression—still the coiled spring of rage—did not change. But, very slowly, the hand that gripped her flesh began to loosen. He reached between Belle’s legs and began to touch her.

Even she hadn’t realized how wet she was until his fingers swirled over her secret places. Belle sighed, delighted to feel anything that wasn’t pain.


Belle felt herself nodding distantly. Yes, it was unconscionable. It was incomprehensible. It was absurd that her body could turn pain into pleasure, that she could desire the man who hurt her. That even if she didn’t enjoy this treatment, she could still be aroused by it. It was madness, she thought numbly. Wasn’t that what he wanted from her?

He must want it, she thought with blurry reasoning. He was aroused by it too. Rumpelstiltskin kept his fingers inside her until he replaced them with his rigid cock. He slid into her from behind and pushed her against the wall.

“It’s impossible,” she heard him mutter as he slowly filled her. “Impossible.”

For few moments, he was gentle. Belle heard him gasp and almost whimper as he felt her wetness, her desire. His hands went up the wall next to her bound wrists. For a moment, both his thumbs rubbed against her forearms.

But then his hands clawed at her suddenly, grasping at her flesh, gripping her to the bone. His pace quickened, he went into her deep and fast. Belle pressed her cheek against the rough stone, bracing herself for what was to come.

Faster and harder he thrust, muttering vulgar oaths. He shouted and grunted like an animal desperate to escape from danger. He was not just thrusting but banging her into the stone, like he was trying to pulverize her bones through the might of his cock.
With a final push, he came inside her. The heat of his pleasure added to the heat of her pain. He rested against her body, pressing himself against her wounded back. Again, Belle heard his whimpering moans, the weak noises she would never have known him capable of if she weren’t exactly where she was now.

Rumpelstiltskin reached up to put his hands over hers. The cuffs released her and they fell together onto the dungeon floor, laying side by side. He curled around Belle and clutched her tightly.

“It’s unfair,” he muttered into her ear. “I take and I take and you give and you give. I give you nothing back.”

Wordless, Belle shook her head. It was her duty to give. It was their deal.

They lay together. They breathed together. Together, on the cold dungeon floor, Belle and Rumpelstiltskin rested and recovered from all that had just happened.

Rumple was the first one to move. He pulled himself away from Belle and then stopped without standing up. “Oh gods,” he whispered. “Belle, what did I do to you?”

Her back on fire, Belle turned to look at him. She saw his face first, the horror that gripped him. His lips pressed together, his jaw clenched. His nostrils flared, she noticed, when he got upset. He was looking at something that upset him.

Belle lowered her gaze a little. Her mind was still foggy. The pain clouded over her thoughts and left only occasional patches of clear blue sky. Rumpelstiltskin was wearing a silvery gray shirt. It matched his boots but it didn’t suit him. The only appealing aspect of the shirt was the splotchy pattern of dark red. It caught her eye.

For a moment, that red was all she could focus on. It meant something, Belle thought. It was more than what it looked like.

It was blood.

Her blood. Belle blinked at the realization. Her blood was staining his shirt. She stared at it, while he stared at her. If she was looking at the aftermath, how horrible was what he saw?

Their eyes met. Rumpelstiltskin seemed just as shaken as she was. His mouth moved, but no sound came out. His eyes flickered, back and forth, between her face and her back. He didn’t notice his shirt.

“Rumple,” Belle mumbled. It was the most she could say. She pointed at his chest.

He looked down at himself and breathed in sharply. He tensed, Belle could see him tense, but then he shook his head. “It’s just laundry,” he said gently. “But you, oh Belle!”

He gathered her up into his arms and Belle found herself wrapped in a sky-blue blanket. It was the same color as the pillow he had given her on her first night.

Picking her up in his arms, Rumpelstiltskin carried Belle over to the bench and set her gently on her belly.

“I need to mend you,” he whispered. “Where is your washing cloth?”

Belle pointed to the ever-steaming cloth and Rumpelstiltskin went to fetch it. Laying her head on her pillow, Belle felt pleasantly numb. The pain was there, of course, but it was so much that it became
nothing. It was just noise in her body, she could ignore it if she had to.

“Now hold still,” Rumpelstiltskin knelt beside her with the cloth in his hand. “This might sting a little.”

Wincing and squirming, she tried to obey him, but even the cuffs were useless at keeping her still. “That hurts!” Belle whimpered.

“Good!” he said loudly. “I mean--good that you’re telling me. It’s not good that it hurts--not this time, anyway.” He sighed, then went back to cleaning her wounds. “What did I do to you?”

Belle had no answer for him. In her clearing mind, all she had was more questions. “How is this different?” her voice was small as she asked. “Why is this worse than anything else?”

“How can you ask that?” Frowning, he showed her the steaming cloth. “What do you see here?”

“Blood,” Belle answered his question as well as her own. “You never made me bleed before.”

“And blood is sacred,” he said softly. “Blood is--more than I ever really expected to take from you, Belle.”

His hands stayed busy above her, but her back was such a mess of pain she couldn’t discern what was happening. On the floor at his feet there was a spool of his golden thread. He must have conjured it.

“What are you doing?” Belle asked him.

“Mending you, like I said.” He held up a length of thread between two fingers. From one end of the thread there hung a silver needle, curved as the crescent moon.

“You’re sewing me,” Belle said mostly to herself. At home, during the war, the doctors had trained the castle’s needlewomen to sew up the skin of wounded men. It was the cleanest way to keep the body whole, to keep the flesh from putrefying. They had used catgut--healing the flesh of men with the flesh of animals. “You’re sewing me with gold.”

“Magic gold, don’t forget.” His mouth quirked, it might have been a smile. “It will look beautiful in your body and help you heal more quickly.”

Belle had the image of her back, pale and bare and marked not by scars or red wounds, but by stirpes of Rumpelstiltskin’s gold. As though her body were a dress to be embroidered with his thread.

“Where did you learn how to sew?” Belle spoke to keep herself awake, and to keep him talking to her.

“Oh, I’m full of handy skills,” he brushed her hair back fondly. “As full as you are of questions today.”

“I just want you to talk to me,” she murmured. “I hate it when you’re silent.”

He rested his hand on her head for a moment. Then he took it away. “Thank you,” he cut the thread of the last stitch against his thumbnail. “For telling me what you want. I’ll try not to be so remote in the future.”

“You were angry,” Belle whispered. “At me.”

“I was angry at a good many things.” His eyes stayed focused on her wounds. “But you were the
“Am I healed now?”

“You will have scars,” he said. “Scars are important, they show what you’ve survived. I cannot take away what I did to you.” He swallowed. “I could take away the memory of today, of last night.”

“No,” Belle said quickly. “Please don’t ever erase my memories.”

“Not even if I grant you a wish every time I do?” There was a hint of impishness in his voice. He was joking with her, referring to the story in the book he had given her.

She shook her head, but with a slight smile. “Not even for that.”

He got up off the floor. “Can you sit? I’d like to hold you.”

Her back ached a little when she moved, but it was a warm glow of pain, not the sharp fire it had been. Rumpelstiltskin sat on the bench and Belle rested in his arms, still wrapped in the sky blue blanket. “You still have blood on your shirt.”

“Easily taken care of.” He moved one hand along his chest and the blood lifted off the silk. Drop by drop it hung in the air around their heads.

“That’s almost pretty,” Belle said. “If you forget what it’s made of.”

“Blood can be very beautiful,” Rumpelstiltskin said distantly. With a slow twirl of his finger he set the droplets to spinning. They looked like red stars or a model of the planets in orbit. “It’s precious.”

“Sacred, you said.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “It should not be given or taken lightly.” He shook his head. Belle could feel him underneath her, feel him coming back to himself. “I need to pay you,” he said in a much more normal voice.

Belle blinked. “Pay me? Pay me? But I am payment. I’m only here because of our deal.”

“I know that,” he rubbed her arm with his hand. “And stopping your war bought me much, but we didn’t bargain for blood.”

“Doesn’t that fall under hurting me?”

He shook his head. “It’s not enough. And it’s not just blood. Over and over, I have taken more than I gave you. I am in your debt and I must balance the scales.”

He had said as much when they were on the floor: *I take and I take and you give and you give.* “But isn’t that how you like your deals?”

Again, he shook his head. “This deal is different. We must be fair to each other, you and I. I thought that saving a few thousand lives would be enough to earn a pretty girl, but you, my sweet, are more valuable than I had ever imagined. I cannot short-change you the price of all you give me. So what do you want?”

What did she want? What kind of a question was that? The Dark One could give her the sun and the moon if she was foolish enough to ask for them. What would he really give her? What would she
value most to get from him?

“What do you offer?”

The drops of blood still hung in the air. Rumpelstiltskin brought them down in front of Belle. As she watched, they changed. The liquid became a solid. Droplets became pear-shaped. The surface went from rounded to faceted. Still red, the objects fell into Belle’s lap and she gathered them in her hands. Clinking together, the droplets felt like glass or stones.

“Are these rubies now?” she asked.

He nodded. “I could make a gem for every gift you give me. A ruby for each drop of blood, diamonds for your tears, pearls for my pleasure.”

“Those would have to be black pearls.” Belle said softly as she looked at the jewels in her hands. She had never been so close to so much wealth. But these rubies were her own blood given back to her. That didn’t feel like a proper gift. “When you came to my father’s study, that first day when we called you for help, you turned gold into dust.”

“And then back into gold, it’s a fun trick for parties.”

Belle couldn’t help but snort at him, the creature they had feared so long ago. “My point is,” she said, “what is made can be un-made. Rubies today could turn back into blood if you wanted to.”

“That’s true,” he said. “But I can turn anything into anything. No reward is completely safe.”

“What can you do with knowledge?”

“Knowledge?” he repeated.

Belle nodded. “Facts, the truth. Can your magic turn information into nonsense?”

“The only thing that can turn facts into nonsense is more facts, as any philosopher will tell you. But that is what you crave, Belle? The truth? The truth about what?”

“About you,” she blurted. Quickly, she added: “And about everything. You are so learned, Rumpelstiltskin, and you know more of what’s going on in the world than I ever will. If you want to give me something, give me knowledge, give me the right to ask you questions.”

“You ask questions all the time, little one.” He placed a teasing kiss on her hair.

“Well then this is your chance to make a game of it. You can deny me answers—or make me work for them. It doesn’t have to be all the time, just when I’ve excelled in some way, when I’ve given you exceptional pleasure.”

“Or when I’ve given you exceptional pain.”

“Yes,” Belle agreed. It would be easier for her to endure pain if she knew there was a reward at the end of it.

“So if I let you ask me a question today, will that make up for how I’ve treated you lately?”

“Only if you answer truthfully.”

“Oh, I’m always truthful,” he quipped. “If you ask nicely, I might even be persuaded to be honest.”
Belle grinned and nodded. “Honesty is preferred.”

“Very well then.” He took one of her hands and pressed his lips to the back of it. Belle felt her cuffs grow warm for a moment. “The deal is struck.”

They were silent for a moment. Belle contemplated the enormity of what they had just done. Their deal had changed.

Rumpelstiltskin spoke, softly. “What will your first question be, my dear?”

Belle closed her eyes. She had a question, but she didn’t want to ask it. She didn’t want to spoil the quiet peace that was between them now. She didn’t want to think that their had ever been a time when things had not been peaceful and kind between them. She didn’t want to think that bad things could ever happen between them again.

But she knew that bad things could happen. And she knew she had to ask him about it. She had earned that right.

“Rumplestiltskin,” her voice was stronger than she had thought it would be, “would you ever rape me?”

Underneath her, his body tensed. His hands still held onto hers, but that hold had become a clenching grip. Belle heard the breath catch in his throat. It took him a moment, but eventually he spoke:

“It’s kind of you to think I haven’t already. What with one thing and another, this is not the life a maiden dreams of.”

“That doesn’t mean I am unwilling.”

“But last night… when you were ill…” he didn’t finish his thought but made a disgusted noise.

“When I was ill, I was ill. I didn’t want to do anything, even if it was something I would normally enjoy. It was a… special circumstance.”

He scoffed, “Special indeed.”

He hadn’t answered the question yet. Belle persisted. “So, knowing what you know now, what would you do in the future?”

He shook his head. “The future is a river with many streams, my Belle. It is well and good for me to sit here now, calm and rational, and say that I would never hurt you again. But in the moment? In the heat of passion? How am I to know what I would do? And if I say I don’t want to hurt you and then I do, then what is the value of you asking the question? It would make me a liar as well as… everything else.”

“Rumple,” Belle sat up to look at him. “Do you trust me?”

He blinked at her. “Trust you with what?”

“Do you trust my judgement? My understanding of myself? Do you trust that if you want to take me one hundred times, I will happily oblige you ninety-nine times?”

He looked at her, brow furrowed. “I… suppose I do, yes.”

“Will you allow me to trust you? May I trust in this moment, in this calmness, here and now? May I trust in the man I’m looking at right now?”
Ha gaped at her. “Why would you want to?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Belle said. “I do. And if you, right now, tell me that you will never take me when I don’t want it, I will believe you.”

He shook his head, didn’t look at her. “You’re a fool, sweet Belle. A fool to trust in the Dark One.”

“I’ll only trust you if you tell me I may.”

His eyes found hers again. He looked at her, wary and puzzled, mystified. But deep in the back of his eyes, Belle saw a glimmer of light. Like a blue sky peeking out of darkened clouds, she saw hope in his eyes. Slowly, he spoke. “You may trust me, Belle,” he said. “You may trust that I will never rape you again.”

“Thank you,” she said. But she knew her words were not enough.

Unwrapping herself from the blanket, Belle got out of Rumpelstiltskin’s lap and knelt by the bench on the floor. He sat up when she did this, and Belle waited until his feet touched the floor before she moved.

“Thank you,” she said again, before she bent down and kissed his boots.
The Reward

Chapter Summary

Belle wants to ask a question. What will she endure to get it?

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains pain but it's extremely consensual!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the two of them had agreed to amend the terms of their deal, Rumpelstiltskin had spent an entire day spinning in his tower. Belle didn’t mind the separation at first. She spent that time pondering the questions she would ask him, the next time she was hurt enough to deserve the treat of asking.

Her back healed quickly. The golden threads he had sewn into her itched, but it wasn’t any worse than the scabs and scratches she used to get as a little girl climbing trees. As a child, she had been the type to scratch and pick at her injuries, which often made them much worse than the initial cut. It was just as well that she couldn’t reach the wounds that marked her back now.

Recovery wasn’t very painful, but she still felt the strange invasion of the golden thread in her skin. Often during the day she would feel the itch and her thoughts would fly to what Rumpelstiltskin had done to her.

Thinking of punishments took on a new dimension now. It wasn’t just that her willing acceptance pleased Rumpelstiltskin—though for a long time that had been enough for her to keep accepting pain. And it wasn’t just the strange, floating looseness that came over her afterward—though that had been enough as well. There was more to it now. With this change, Belle had a reason to seek out pain. She could allow herself to want him to hurt her, because she knew that he would give her something precious in return.

So now it thrilled her to imagine him torturing her, just the same as it thrilled her to imagine him taking her. Her body was his, after all. It had been since they had first made their deal. He could beat her and bruise her and scar her and she could think of it just as fondly as when he fingered her or fucked her or kissed her. When she touched herself at night, she imagined Rumpelstiltskin using her, every part of her, in every way. He would have neither guilt nor shame nor regret. He would reward her, and that would ease his conscience, until he no longer felt that he owed her anything.

From now on, when he hurt her, he would reward her with a question. She could ask him anything, about his magic or his feelings or his past. How had he lived before she came here? How had he developed his singular desires? Did other men want the things he wanted? Could other women feel the way he made Belle feel? Had there been other women in the dungeons before her? Had anyone else ever worn cuffs like hers?

She itched to ask these questions. She thought of them every time she felt the lingering hurt in her
she trained her body to desire the treatment that would give them to her. But what she imagined was not quite what was happening.

Rumpelstiltskin spent more days in the tower, or out on business. He would still come to her in the mornings, feed her and brush her hair. He would still take her—pleasure her and get his pleasure from her. But they hadn’t played any games since she had gotten sick. He hadn’t hurt her since he had made her bleed. He would order her about, but there was no imperiousness in his manner. He wasn’t playful at all.

Instead he seemed skittish around her, cautious. And it wasn’t even that he was showing affection but not hurting her. He was so dispassionate, even when he took her. He was cordial, even as he had her on top of the table with her legs spread.

It was infuriating. Just as Belle had begun to prepare herself for rougher treatment, Rumpelstiltskin had suddenly become deferential!

For seven days she got nothing more from him than lukewarm desire. On the seventh night, as Belle lay under her new blanket with her hand between her legs, she began to form a plan. She had to get his attention somehow. She had to convince him that she could handle more than what he was giving her now. He was afraid of himself, she knew. He was afraid of hurting her beyond what his magic could heal. But did he know that she wasn’t afraid of him? By now she knew that Rumpelstiltskin would protect her from the darkest parts of himself. She trusted him to keep her safe—or to make it up to her if he didn’t.

But how to ask for pain? Belle had never been one to break rules, and Rumple hardly ever gave her any she could disobey. The cuffs controlled her. Anything she wanted to do that went against his will was a physical impossibility. Anything they allowed her to do was something he didn’t care about.

Belle swirled her fingers around the pleasure spot between her legs as she thought. She wanted him to hurt her. He wouldn’t do it without a reason, not the way he was acting now. The pain would have to be a punishment. He would have to discipline her. She would have to do something drastic. She would have to insult him.

Faster and faster she rubbed herself, imagining all the things that she could do and all the ways that he could respond. All the ways that he could hurt her. All the pleasures they could share together. Her body seized abruptly and she gave out a muffled yelp in the darkness.

Belle went to sleep smiling at the thought of her own pain.

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“You’re in a dreamy little mood today, aren’t you, girl?”

From her place on the floor, Belle nodded and licked flecks of porridge off her lips. “I suppose I am,” she smiled. She couldn’t stop smiling this morning, for all she bit her lips to hide it. Rumpelstiltskin had noticed.

It was still breakfast time. Neither of them had done anything yet. But already Belle felt that giddy, floating feeling that always came after a game. Already, she wanted nothing more than for him to play with her. Oh, would he take the bait she wanted to set? Would she get an opportunity to offer
herself to him today?

Rumpelstiltskin looked at her curiously and Belle wondered if he could see her thoughts. Or was her face so obvious that he didn’t need to? But if he could see what she wanted, surely he would have given it to her by now. Or was the denying her a part of the game as well? Did he like her like this, silly with longing for pain? Did he want her tormented by a lack of torture?

Wrapped up in her own mind, Belle didn’t hear his order. But the cuffs stood her up and took off her robe. Her body followed Rumpelstiltskin without her mind having to think about a single step. He took her to the dining room and sat at the head of the table. Belle stood by his side, clasping her hands behind her back so he wouldn’t see her trembling with anticipation.

“Well?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, with just a hint of his delightful theatrics. “What are you waiting for? It’s tea time!”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle smiled and went to the cupboard. She pulled out the tea tray. As usual, there were two cups—the whole one that she always gave him, and the chipped one. She had never served him the chipped cup. She had never dared. For months, she had wondered why he kept it, if it was meant to be a torment to her, a constant reminder of a time when she had failed.

A time when she had been afraid of punishment. But she wasn’t afraid anymore.

With shaking hands, Belle poured Rumpelstiltskin’s tea. She added cream and three sugars and walked the cup and saucer back to him, still smiling like a fool.

He was looking at her, with more interest than she had seen in a week. Perhaps he would understand. Perhaps he wanted this too.

In one fluid motion, Belle placed the teacup in front of Rumpelstiltskin and sank to kneel at his feet. She didn’t kiss his boots, not yet, but she knelt on the floor and waited.

After a moment, Rumpelstiltskin’s hand came into her line of sight. He was holding the cup and saucer. “What is this?” His voice was clipped and bright.

Belle tried to force herself to sound calm. “I believe it is tea, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“And how is my tea being served to me?”

Her heart pounding, Belle answered: “In a chipped cup, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“And how is my tea being served to me?”

He took the cup away and a moment later, Belle felt warm tea splashing down her back. It didn’t hurt, but she gasped at the shock of it, letting out a laugh as the liquid poured over her body. It ran over her shoulders, between her breasts and down her spine. There was a strange numbness when the tea went over her stitches. She couldn’t feel anything around the golden thread.

With a clatter, Rumpelstiltskin slid the chipped cup across the table away from him. “Try again,” he ordered. “Properly, this time, unless you want me to be cross.”

Belle’s stomach fluttered as she took the chipped cup back to the teapot. He knew what she was doing. It was kind of him to warn her, to make sure she wasn’t doing it by accident. But Belle was very deliberate.

She prepared the tea again. Walked back with it again. Set the chipped cup in front of him again.

He looked at the cup, then up at her. She met his gaze. It was all she could do not to nod, to say, Yes,
this is exactly what you think it is. Pretending not to be playing was a part of the game.

Slowly, he shook his head. “You disobedient, worthless whore!” His eyes gleamed as he stood up and grabbed Belle roughly by her arm. He pulled her to the carpet by the fireplace and threw her to the ground. “Stay there,” he ordered. “I’m going to drink my tea and consider what to do with you.”

Punish me, Belle wanted to say. But clearly he would. He already was.

The cuffs had pulled her to her knees and fixed her wrists on a point in the air behind her. Her arms were pulled back tightly and her back curved into the shape of a C. This posture lifted her breasts into the air and made her head fall back on her shoulders. The hearth fire warmed her exposed torso. Upside down, she could see Rumpelstiltskin standing on the edge of the table. He was drinking from the chipped cup, watching her.

Belle tried to catch her breath. After a week of tepid distance, this sudden roughness was exhilarating. It felt so good to be vulnerable again, to feel Rumpelstiltskin’s attention on her body. She felt a wonderful, baffling assurance: that she was safest when he was hurting her.

And he would give her a question, when it was over. That thought was like dessert after an already fine meal. That she would get something more, as a treat, after something she already wanted. It was like being spoiled. His attention was enough. The way her body reacted was enough. That she would get all of that and a question as well? Her heart pounded at the thought.

She heard the gentle clink of the teacup being set down. Rumpelstiltskin walked toward her, shaking his head.

“What am I going to do with you, girl?” he asked as he circled her. “You’re not unintelligent. You know how you ought to behave. I can’t see how you would want to encourage monsters to come out of their caves. Why provoke evil forces you can’t control? Why not leave well enough alone?”

Straining her neck, Belle looked at him. “Because it’s fun,” she answered.

She let her head fall back again. Rumpelstiltskin approached her. With shaking fingers, he brushed her hair away from her neck and shoulders. Now it fell back from her head in long loose waves, free.

“I know how I’m going to punish you.” His voice was lower now, more serious. His hands rubbed along the line of her jaw.

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin?”

His fingers trailed down to her breasts. “A cup for a cup,” he grinned.

Belle felt the pain before she could know what he had done. She gasped, but the sensation didn’t stop. Pulling her head up, she saw him digging his long black nails into the soft flesh of her breasts. He met her eyes and smirked.

Her secret places shuddered and she relaxed her head again. Above her, she could feel Rumpelstiltskin loosen his grip. She could imagine the ring of crescent-shaped indentations he had left around her breasts. He rubbed her flesh soothingly, first one breast and then the other. The comfort eased the pain, but they were just beginning.

He played with her nipples, rubbing them between the thumb and forefinger of both hands until they were painfully hard. Then he slapped the flesh of her breasts as hard as he ever slapped her bottom. Belle let out a strangled cry.
“Oh is that too much?” he said cheerily. “Perhaps you’ll think twice before you serve me broken things in the future.”

Belle shook her head. “I don’t regret it.”

“Not yet!”

She felt a thin line of fire smack across her chest. He was hitting her with something, like a riding crop or a switch. Belle tried to look up and see what he was using, but he just hit her again, then coaxed her nipples back into hardness.

Back and forth it went, pain, then comfort, then arousal, then pain again. Her hips rocked in the air, yearning and hungry. Falling back, Belle rested her weight against the cuffs, the magic that kept her in place. Rumple gave her another hit across the chest and then began pinching her nipples, pulling at her flesh until she wailed.

“Still no regrets, my slut?”

Belle shook her head. “Touch me,” she said hoarsely, “if you want to know what I think of this. Touch me between the legs.”

“Oh, but your body is a beautiful liar and I don’t trust it. Give me your words, little whore. Tell me when I pleasure you.”

“You do,” Belle moaned as he scraped his nails from one side of her chest to the other. It hurt so much. It was perfect.

“And you pleasure me,” he murmured, moving his hands up to her hair. Gently, he pulled her head forward, easing the curve of her spine. The cuffs still held her arms back, but she was kneeling upright now. Her head--her mouth--was right in front of his leather breeches.

Pain tears drying on her cheeks, Belle looked up at Rumpelstiltskin. “Are you going to give me your cock?”

He curled a lock of her hair around his finger. “Ask nicely.”

The pain was more intense now that he had stopped than it had been while he was torturing her. Her mind was bleary, unfocused. It took her a moment to do as he said. “Please, Rumpelstiltskin, may I suck on your cock?”

He gave out a sound of delighted exclamation. “Oh, well, since you said please!”

With his hands still in her hair, a slit opened in his breeches and his cock sprang out. It would have been comical, if Belle didn’t want it so badly. The dining room was dark, the curtains drawn like always. His body was between her and the fire, keeping him in shadow. Sometimes Belle wondered if she would ever actually see Rumpelstiltskin’s cock, or if she would only ever know it by touch and smell and taste.

Taste.

Her hands still extended behind her back, Belle stuck out her tongue and ran it up and down the length of him. He was so hot against her tongue, so hard when she ran kisses up his shaft, so large when she tried to fit him in her mouth.

It was easy to slide about half of his cock inside her mouth. If she inched her way up, she could take
another quarter of his length. But still, even after all this time as Rumpelstiltskin’s whore, she couldn’t get all of him inside her mouth. Gagging, Belle leaned away from him and caught her breath.

At least Rumpelstiltskin didn’t seem to mind. His gasps and moans indicated he enjoyed her making the attempt.

But it bothered Belle that she couldn’t have all of him in her mouth. He went everywhere else. He filled her cunt to the brim. He could fit snugly inside her ass if he used enough oil. Why was this different? Why was her stupid throat rejecting him?

She wanted him. She wanted him inside her, wanted him to feel welcome in every part of her. It seemed especially important, now. After her illness and everything that had happened. After this week of lackluster distance. After he had given her the pain she had so craved--she wanted nothing more than for him to know he could claim her. He could have her, and use her, and know that he was invited.

Belle reversed her tactic. She started small, sucking only on the tip of his cock. Slowly, she moved her mouth forward, easing up the length of him. She opened her mouth wide like a whore. Above her, Rumpelstiltskin’s body stilled. His hands in her hair gripped even more tightly. Did he know what she was trying? Could he help her succeed?

With a deep breath through her nose, Belle pushed herself forward, taking the last few inches in one movement. Leather pressed against her nose. She felt Rumpelstiltskin’s body relax. He sighed. “You perfect girl,” he whispered.

Belle felt more dizzy than perfect. She had reached this peak, but she couldn’t stay there. Falling back, she took in deep, gasping breaths. His body was still darkness against darkness, but she could see the shine of her saliva coating his cock.

He grinned at her. “Did you bite off more than you could chew, sweet slut?”

Belle shook her head and breathed. “I bit nothing, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“No you did not,” he chuckled. He reached out for her again, to hold her hair. “Come here, my dear. I want to come on your tits while they’re still red.”

Belle let out a whine at his words, at the image that flashed in her mind. He would get what he wanted. He would use her body to fulfil his dark, wonderful desires. He would satisfy himself on her today and she would whimper his name when she came that night.

“You’re a good girl, Belle,” he said softly, his fingers trailing through her curly hair. “That’s why I’m going to fuck you senseless.”

He started slowly, filling her mouth and then retreating to let her breathe. But gradually he increased in intensity. The cock in Belle’s mouth became her whole world, the shaking of her head like an earthquake. His thrusts were short and vicious, seizing against her head.

He didn’t press himself deep enough for her to gag, but that also meant she no longer had a moment to stop and breathe. His hands squeezed on either side of Belle’s face, forcing her to look at him, to follow his movements, to be a part of him. This was a true joining of bodies, when her entire being became an extension of his desire. It was beautiful and draining and it did leave her senseless.

He was still in Belle’s mouth when he came. As always, Belle gagged on his semen and spat it up. It
was still so shocking to have her mouth filled with his seed as well as his cock. The addition was always too sudden and too hot for her reflexes to allow her to accept it the way she wanted to.

Her arms behind her back, Belle couldn’t wipe the black liquid away from her face. It pooled out of her mouth and she had to let it dribble down onto her chin, run down her neck with the tea from earlier. A few heavy drops fell onto her beaten breasts. Rumpelstiltskin stepped back to get a full view.

“Are they still red?” Belle asked. “Did you get what you wanted?”

“Yes,” he breathed as he looked at her. “Everything I wanted and more.” He blinked several times until he came to himself again. His lips twitched into a smile. “But you must get what you want as well.”

A little overwhelmed, Belle nodded. “Do I deserve a reward, then?”

He scoffed at her and went to his leather armchair, falling into it with a sigh. “I ought to say that was your question and send you off. Teach you a lesson about being cheeky.”

Released from the cuffs, Belle crawled over to kiss his boots. “Will you do that?”

“If I only ever have to answer one question at a time, you’ll need to start being more careful.”

She rose off the floor to kneel beside him, placing her hands on the seat of his chair. “I’m sorry, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“No you’re not.”

No she wasn’t.

“But please,” Belle asked sweetly. “May I have a real question?”

He leaned back in the chair, his eyes closed. “Go ahead, my dear. Ask me anything. Cut me with your sharpest knife.”

His words made Belle pause. Did he think this was a trick? Was he accusing her of wanting to hurt him by seeking out knowledge? Surely he knew her better than that!

Belle had been planning to ask about other girls he might have made deals with. But if he thought she had malicious intentions, she would be better off asking for something that had nothing to do with him. She hated to have him think she would use their games as an excuse to do him harm.

She had been silent for too long. Rumpelstiltskin opened his eyes and sat up. “Well?”

“Sorry,” she said. “I was trying to think.”

He rubbed his forehead. “Just tell me what you want to know, woman.”

“How is my village?”

Rumpelstiltskin stopped mid-rub. For a moment, he was still. Then he slowly turned his head to look at her. “Your village?” he said softly. “Your people? You want to ask a question about them?”

Belle nodded. “They’re still important to me. I hope they’re well.”

“They are,” he answered quickly. “They all curse me for taking you away from them. All across
your father’s land there are memorials and shrines to you, to their brave Lady Belle who saved them all.”

Suddenly overcome, Belle pressed her lips together. They were acting like she was dead. “But they are well.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded. “Safe from the ogres, with full larders and warm houses to see them through the winter.”

“Do they miss me?” Belle whispered. “Do they really care that I’m gone?”

“You shouldn’t waste your questions, Belle. You know your people loved you. Your women are lost without you, heartsick and bewildered. Like sheep without a shepherd. Your father bemoans the loss of his heir. Do you want to know about your betrothed?”

Belle snorted. “I bet he’s found someone more suited to him to marry.”

“No, the boy found another war to fight. He’s quite contented, in the company of the men who worship him. But everyone else is miserable without you.”

“But that’s the price,” Belle rested her head against the seat of the chair, pressing against his thigh. “They had to pay too, you said.”

“Yes,” his voice was gentle. He set his hand on her head and Belle felt grounded by his touch.

“I miss them,” Belle whispered. Tears welled up in her eyes and she let them fall silently.

Rumpelstiltskin didn’t say anything. But he stayed with her, while she cried, and his very presence was a comfort. He stroked her hair and let her weep.

After a little while, Belle sat up again. She wiped her eyes and looked at Rumpelstiltskin. He looked back at her, gentle concern etched onto his features. She tried to smile, to let him know that she was alright. “It’s rather a bittersweet reward,” Belle remarked.

His concern eased a little. “The truth can be dangerous, my dear.”

“Painful,” Belle agreed. “But that just makes our arrangement all the more appropriate, doesn’t it?”

“That’s another question.” He stood up and reached down to help her. He let her hands go as soon as she was standing. “I don’t have to answer it.”

Belle let out a half-chuckle. “No, of course not. That would be unfair.”

“One must live by the rules one is bound to. Do you want to go back to your cell?”

She nodded. “It’s too early to sleep, but I want nothing else.”

He didn’t make her walk, but took her by the arm and transported them both back to the dungeons. “Rest, lovely girl,” he said. “Rest your body. I will be making demands of it again soon.”

Even exhausted in every possible way, Belle was able to smile at that announcement. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin. You may demand of me whatever you like.”
Belle's method for deep throating is unverified. I can't personally recommend it, I just made it up. Please be sure to consult with a person who actually gives blowjobs for proper deep throating technique.
Slowly emerging from sleep, Belle was first aware of the warmth around her ankles. She wasn’t accustomed to being warm in the cell. She slept every night curled into a ball with her blanket wrapped around her body and over her head. The steaming wash rag provided a little heat if she kept it close to her body, but for the most part she was always chilled.

But now she was lying on her back and something hot was creeping up her legs. When she opened her eyes she saw morning light filter through the weave of sky-blue blanket. She tried to pull the blanket off herself and see what was below her waist. But she couldn’t move.

Belle’s hands were immobilized, bound above her head and exposed to the cold. When she reached out, her fingers brushed against the rough stone wall. The cuffs had moved her while she slept. They had stretched her out like a prisoner on a rack.

To quell her rising unease, Belle took a breath. This wasn’t what it seemed. Nothing ever was, she knew that. She felt the heat on her knees now, felt the movement, the touching. Touching? Yes, it was touching her. And kissing her, she recognized the feeling now. The heat was a breath, the living warmth of a body between her legs.

Oh.

Instantly, Belle relaxed. “Rumpelstiltskin,” she murmured sleepily. “What are you doing to me?”

The movement stopped for just a moment. Her legs were spread apart now, to accommodate him. He rested his head against her thigh and she could feel his breath as he waited.

He waited. For her. Belle thought she understood: It had been this very act of pleasing her that had failed so devastatingly when she had been sick. He had hated himself after that, after he had made her take a pleasure she hadn’t wanted. He wouldn’t want to make that mistake again. So now he waited. For a signal, a sign, a single word that would tell him whether he should move forward or go back.

Belle took a breath. How strange that he would be so attentive to her comfort. What a heady feeling,
to realize that she could deny him if she chose to. She could tell him to stop and he would. Of course, he might punish her for that refusal later. He might not ask in the future and simply take her the next time he wanted her. But now, in this moment, he was asking. He was denying himself, waiting for her response.

She spread her legs wider to welcome him.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please, Rumpelstiltskin, do whatever you want to me.”

In the silent morning, Belle heard his breath catch. She could almost hear the words he wasn’t saying: *Well, since you said ‘please’!* 

At once, his mouth was on her secret places. His heat met her warmth, as he tasted the wetness left over from the night before. She had touched herself while thinking of him. He lapped and licked at her folds, his tongue and his lips working together to make her whimper and cry out.

Restrained as she was, Belle could only jerk her hips and curl her toes and clench her thighs to encourage him. She wanted to touch him, to bury her fingers in his hair like he did to her when she pleasured him. How good it would be to have him in her hands, to stroke him and hold him and dig her nails into his back when he made her scream.

Rumpelstiltskin was relentless, and Belle had no one to blame but herself. She had invited him to pleasure her, and he was. Her body jerked backwards to escape the intensity, but he followed her, his mouth ever-ready to make her feel more and more.

Chained to the wall, she couldn’t move away. She couldn’t curl into herself the way she did at night. Her pleasure would have no gentle outlet, no quiet inhalation to signal her climax. He would make her come the way he liked her to come: hard and fast and powerful.

He pressed his nose against her pleasure spot, while his mouth took her with a savage hunger. Her hips rose up to meet him and he pulled her legs over his shoulders. Belle dug her heels into his back, against the hardened leather of his coat. It felt so good to touch him even that much, to wrap herself around him, to use her body to feel his body. Moaning, Belle arched her back and squeezed him between her legs. Surely her cunt was covering his whole face, surely he was feeling every part of her as he made her convulse in sublime ecstasy. He made her shudder again and again until she grasped him one final time and let loose the scream he demanded.

Exhausted and panting, Belle fell back onto her pillow. Her legs sprawled limply on either side of Rumpelstiltskin. The cuffs had let go of her hands when she had orgasmed, and she was able to pull the blanket off her face.

The cold shocked her awake. Her breath hovered over her, visible in the frigid morning air. Belle pulled her arms down under the blanket to warm them. Recent activity had made the space under the blanket very warm indeed.

Rumpelstiltskin had moved himself up from her cunt and rested heavily on her stomach. He was still covered by the blanket, but Belle could feel him panting. For a moment, both of them breathed together, hidden from each other’s sight, and yet united by their actions.

Slowly, Belle reached down and rested her hands on Rumpelstiltskin. His leather coat was so thick she had no idea if he would even notice the tentative contact. For a few breaths, she barely touched him, merely traced swirling patterns on his back. It soothed her to make these movements. Did it soothe him to feel them?
Growing bold, Belle traveled up to his high collar to delicately pet his crinkled hair. It was damp with sweat. Under the blanket he must be sweltering.

For a brief, wonderful moment, Belle wondered what it would be like to be under a blanket with him, to have him as naked as she was, both of them sweaty and hot and exhausted. Would his flesh feel good against her palms? Would his skin be soft and smooth? Or rough? Was he green and scaly everywhere? Would there ever be a day when she would see him without layers and layers of clothing?

He moved and Belle pulled her hands away with a flash of guilt, as though she had stolen something. Rumpelstiltskin crawled up her body and popped his head out from under the blanket. His eyes gleamed and the lower half of his face glistened with fluids. He gave Belle a grin. He didn’t seem to have noticed her touching him. Or if he noticed, he didn’t seem to mind.

“Good morning,” he smiled, and bent down to kiss her.

Their mouths met, flooding Belle’s senses with the smell and taste of her own wetness. She kissed him back, wrapped herself around him again. She opened her legs that he might enter her, encircled his shoulders with her arms that she might cling to him as he took her, as he fucked her. She wanted him. How could she want him again, so quickly after he had just pleasured her? How was it possible that she was both sated and starving for him?

She ground her hips against his breeches as they kissed, feeling the bulge that meant he wanted her too.

He pulled his lips away and groaned. “You’re making it very hard to leave you, little slut.”

“Good.” Emboldened by desire, Belle pulled him back down. “I’m glad it’s hard. I don’t want you to leave.”

“I know what you want, you harlot.” He hopped off her, shifting the blanket away in the process. Belle winced at the sudden cold. “I thought I was doing you a kindness by tending to you before I left, but I see it only inflamed your wanton desires.”

Belle sat up, pulling the blanket over her body while it was still warm. “Is that a problem?”

“Only when I have an appointment. And punctuality will make Princess Abigail more agreeable.”

He was going out to make a deal, Belle realized with dismal resignation. He was wearing his spiky black coat, his shiny black boots. This was the Dark One about his business, ready to make royalty cower before him.

“Princess Abigail?” Belle asked. That was King Midas’ daughter, the princess of Belle’s kingdom. “What does she need you for?”

He smirked at her. “When I come back, I’ll see what I can make you do to earn that question.”

Belle sighed. Putting a price on her curiosity had some disadvantages. “Will you tell me when you’ll be back?”

“If all goes well, I’ll return tonight. If all goes poorly, it may be a few thousand years. If I don’t return after a decade, you are permitted to leave the castle and come rescue me.”

Belle rolled her eyes and nodded. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”
“The castle is your playground, my dear. If you truly need me, you may call my name and I will come for you.” He grinned wickedly as the wine-red smoke enveloped him. “Just as you came for me!”

And with that, he was gone.

Sinking back into her pillow, Belle considered her options. Days when Rumpelstiltskin was out of the castle were always long and boring. She would have to think of something to do.

Sleeping could easily eat up a few hours. Rolling over onto her stomach, Belle closed her eyes and tried to rest. But she was already awake. The sun was bright and it was too cold to stay in the cell if she didn’t have to.

If she touched herself, it would make her tired again. She might sleep that way. But when she put her hand to her secret places, they were still too swollen and tender to play with. If Rumple were here, he could make her come again. And again, and again. Belle made a low, desirous sound at the image of his cock swimming in her wetness, pounding into her while she was slippery from one orgasm after another. The thought made her throb, but she still didn’t want to touch. Best to save her yearnings for when Rumple would be able to satisfy them.

He hadn’t fed her, she realized. Or brushed her hair. For a moment, Bell considered calling his name, demanding that he come to her and take care of her properly. But she didn’t. She would be fine until he came back. There was no reason to appear desperate and needful.

Of course, she was needful. Not only for food or for her baser appetites, but for him. She wanted his company, his attention. She wanted the familiar routine that marked most of their days. She wanted him, and it irked her that she had to share him with anyone, that any deal would be more important than the one he had made with her.

Having no other choices, Belle decided to get up and start the day. Perhaps a walk around the castle would clear her head of these silly thoughts. If nothing else, just about any other room would be warmer than the cell.

The door opened freely, a fact that still amazed her. It was so like Rumpelstiltskin, to put her in a dungeon but refuse to lock the door. He was nothing like what he seemed, and the puzzle of him excited Belle as much as any of the pleasures they shared.

Would Princess Abigail be able to hold her own against Rumple? Belle had never met her kingdom’s princess, but she had always respected her. She had fancied the two of them as kindred spirits. After all, they were both the only daughters of powerful men, set to inherit a bounty that many said was unworthy of their sex.

If Belle had married Gaston, her village would have gone under his control, and belonged to his family forever. But when Princess Abigail had sought out a husband, she had made it clear that she would only take a man who could kneel before her and call her his queen. It had been a bold declaration and Belle had ever after looked at the princess in awe.

Princess Abigail was a woman who knew her own mind and had enough power to make other people respect it. What did she want with the Dark One? Something big, Belle reasoned as she went up a flight of stairs out of the dungeons. The princess would have to want powerful magic, something that could not be bought with her father’s gold or her kingdom’s armies or her own iron will. What price would Rumpelstiltskin demand for such a boon?

“He had better do right by her,” Belle said out loud. Princess Abigail had been given much, but
much was required of her as well. She deserved whatever happiness she sought.

Finally, Belle found herself in a part of the castle she had never seen before. She always liked to get lost when she had all day to explore. She would poke around in areas entirely new, then try to find her way back to something familiar, and all the better if she could get her bearings without ever retracing her steps.

The first door she opened was a bedroom so grand she had to pass through three antechambers before she got to the bed. All the walls were hung with rich tapestries that told the story of a unicorn hunt.

No, Belle corrected herself, it was not a hunt. There were no hunters in these tapestries, no men with spears and barking dogs. Those were the sort of scenes that had adorned her castle at home. They always ended with the magical beast either captured or slaughtered.

But these were peaceful images. Here the unicorn was surrounded by maidens. Pretty girls played music for him and wove a crown of flowers for him to wear. Over the course of a few tapestries, the unicorn came closer and closer to the human maidens. Eventually, he rested his head in one of their laps, and no harm befell him. At the end of the story, one of the women was bold enough to grasp the unicorn by the horn. Perhaps the creature had been captured, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Belle bit her lips as she looked at these tapestries. Why would Rumpelstiltskin have such a story in his home? Was there a meaning? Or was she just seeing what she wanted to see?

She shook her head and kept looking around. Though the windows in the bedroom were covered—like so many other windows in Rumpelstiltskin’s castle—there were two doors in one wall that shone sunlight through brightly-colored glass.

“Oh how lovely!” Belle said aloud. She had only seen stained glass in the great temples in the cities she had visited with her parents, much larger and grander than anything in her village. She had never even heard of such art in a place that wasn’t reserved for the gods. The light splashed across the floor in a cascade of color—blue and red and purple.

Belle went to the doors and opened them. She stepped out onto a balcony, overlooking a courtyard. This room was set into the wall. She could see almost all of the castle from this spot. It was the first time she had seen the outside of her new home.

The whole building was laid out in a circle, two wings surrounding the courtyard and protecting the main keep. A road ran through the courtyard, from the outer gates to the entrance of the center building. Great wooden doors in the keep probably opened up to the foyer, where she had first appeared on her first night here. Those doors were the way out she wouldn’t be using. The diverging halls in the foyer lead out to the two wings Belle saw in stone around her.

The wings changed from side passageways to solid front walls, connected in the center by sturdy iron gates. The road bisected the area evenly, with the other wing a mirror image of this one. Belle could even see another room with another balcony, directly across from where she stood.

The courtyard was a mess of gray mud and leafless trees. Belle hoped that this was only because it was nearly winter. Perhaps there would be grass and flowers by springtime.

Mountains surrounded the castle, snow-capped peaks that reached up into the cloudy sky. A cold wind ripped through her robe and Belle clutched her arms over her chest. She shivered, but she didn’t want to go in yet.
Towers and turrets lined the corners of the walls at strategic points. Some were topped by pointed roofs, a few others by rounded glass domes. Wine-red flags flapped in the breeze atop the turrets. From the outside, Belle couldn’t tell which tower was the one where Rumpelstiltskin spun his straw and worked his magic. There were more towers than she had thought, more places for him to hide things, more secrets that she itched to discover.

But it was too cold for her to stay outside any longer. Reluctantly, Belle went back to the colored glass doors and put herself back in the dark interior of the castle. It was warmer, yes, but the air felt stuffy and close compared to the bracing wind out on the balcony. As soon as she closed the door, she had the awful feeling that it would never open again, that she would be kept inside forever—not only a prisoner but a hermit, never again to see the sun.

Panicking, Belle opened the door again, stuck her head out, and breathed deeply of all the fresh air she could.

“You’re being silly, girl,” she told herself when she shut the glass door again. “He hasn’t kept you from moving around yet, he isn’t going to start now.”

Rumpelstiltskin may have avoided daylight himself, but he had never forbidden her from seeking it out. And now that she knew where this room was, she would be able to find it again. And she could find the other room with the balcony as well. She could come back when the weather was more pleasant. She could come back any time she liked.

He hadn’t locked her in a cell, he wasn’t going to lock her away anywhere else.

After a few more deep breaths to steady her nerves, Belle left the unicorn room and kept wandering.

It occurred to her that she had never found a library in this castle. That seemed odd in the domain of a man as scholarly as Rumpelstiltskin. Wouldn’t he have a thousand books on every subject under the sun? It was possible he already knew every fact in every book ever written, but that wouldn’t stop him from wanting the proof of his knowledge easy at hand. Books were valuable, even ones that weren’t full of magic. Surely he would have a place for them as he did every other treasure in his collection.

Surely he had such a place. She just hadn’t found it yet.

Belle opened every door in this hallway, looking for anything more interesting than endless bedrooms. The corridor ended in a rounded wall that seemed to be the outside of a tower brought indoors. There was no door in the rounded wall, no way to get inside the tower from the hallway.

Wasn’t that a waste of a tower? Even if there was a door on the other side—the front wall of the castle that merged to become the outer gates—why did the guards stationed in the tower to have no other means to get out? If the castle were under attack, the men in the tower would have to go through the whole of the enemy before they could even send a warning to the people inside!

Of course, how often would Rumpelstiltskin’s castle be under attack and defended by soldiers?

Turning away from the strange wall, she saw an unassuming door. It was plain wood, and very small. Belle had to stoop to enter the room, but she could stand up in the vaulted ceiling inside.

It was a mean little room—bare plaster walls and one uncurtained window that looked out to the forested valley below. With no fireplace, the room was almost as cold as her cell. It was smaller than where she slept too. Was it originally supposed to be a closet?

But now it served the function of a bedroom. The bed in the corner was tiny. Belle would surely
crush it if she tried to lay on the straw mattress and cover herself with the sheep skin and the knitted wool blanket. In the other corner near the window there was a square wooden table with one little chair. It was set with a wooden plate and bowl and a small drinking cup made out of bone. There was only one regular-sized chair in this room, a rocking chair set in the corner nearest the door and farthest from the window.

All the furniture looked homemade, rickety and worn. The table legs had splinters on the sides and faint words scratched into the top. Belle stepped over a rag rug to look at the scratchings. They were mostly just lines carved into the grain of the wood--out of boredom, perhaps. She made out a faint letter B, but time had faded everything else.

Belle became increasingly troubled as she kept looking around the room. Near the table was a narrow shelf, lined with a few slim books. Hanging from a hook there was a horn book--letters written on wood and covered by a piece of horn, used to teach a child to read. Belle repeated the thought, as she put together the pieces of this room: A child.

The books on the shelf were primers, simple stories and rhymes to teach letters. The village school at home had books like this. A is for Apple, B is for Ball, C is for Cat and so on. There was a book of sums as well, and Ye Goode Childe’s Storeys of Our Lande --an old book in an old spelling.

Toys were stacked neatly on the ground. A leather ball, a woolen sheep, a group of little human figures made out of twisted straw. There was a stout stick in the corner, and Belle could imagine a lively boy playing at swords and pretending to fight.

Or perhaps it wasn’t play. Perhaps the child kept here had made himself a weapon. Perhaps he had tried to attack his captor. Perhaps that was the stick he was beaten with whenever he tried to escape.

Belle couldn’t shake the terrible feeling that this room was a prison. It couldn’t be the sleeping quarters of a servant--a pageboy or scullery maid would be constantly at work, they would have no time for toys or learning. And it was clearly not the chamber of a lordling. Belle had seen the nurseries set aside for the heirs to this castle. There were dollhouses that were better furnished than this cell. This was a room for a peasant, kept alive but not free. This was a room for a poor boy. A poor boy who would never grow up to be a poor man.

There were clothes. Belle noticed them even in her growing panic. A cupboard by the bed had a door swung loose and she could see the clothing inside. From the clothes, she could track the age of this child. She would be able to see how old he’d gotten before...before...

Belle focused on the clothes. There were tiny nightgowns, finely stitched and embroidered with a pattern of leaves. She imagined a mother--or not yet a mother, but a young woman great with child--staying up late into the night, sneaking minutes away from her regular work to make something beautiful for her baby.

There was no embroidery on the rest of the clothes. The baby had become a toddling child who had to wear larger gowns. The stitches on these pieces were large and uneven, as though made by a beginner. They had been sewn by a different person than the infant gowns--perhaps an older sister, learning how to sew, wanting to help her mother.

The clothes were certainly made for a boy. There were tiny breeches, patched many times at the knees and re-sewn at the seams. The hems had been taken down as the boy grew. The stitches were better now, small and neat and even. The older sister had improved her skill.

There were a few linen shirts--rips mended, patches affixed, hems lengthened. The shirts were thin and soft from wear. Were they not so neatly tended, she might have mistaken them for rags. Belle
could touch this family’s poverty in the fabric of the boy’s clothing.

There was a traveling cloak, undyed wool fastened by a button made of ram’s horn. The cloak could have almost fit Belle. The boy had grown tall. How old had he been when he’d worn it?

There was a yellow shawl among the clothes, but it was the matching knitted cap that finally broke her. Like everything else, it was small, made to fit a child’s head. Belle could feel the work that had gone into making this cap. She could feel the time that had gone into the loops and purls. She could feel the love that had been a part of every step in this process—from shearing the sheep to carding the wool to dyeing it yellow with onion shells to spinning the wool into yarn to finally knitting the cap—just to make a present the little boy would outgrow far too soon.

Someone had loved this boy. Someone had treasured him and given him their meager best, even in the midsts of heartbreaking poverty.

And someone had taken him away and locked him in a room no bigger than a horse’s stall.

“Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle’s voice shook as she called him. “Rumpelstiltskin.” It couldn’t be true, it couldn’t be what she thought it was. “Rumpelstiltskin!” The last invocation was almost a screech.

“What is it? I was about to get her to tell me—” But when he looked at where they were his words stopped. “What are you doing in this room?”

She didn’t answer. “What happened to him?” Belle’s hands were shaking as she held out the cap to the Dark One. “The little boy who used to wear this cap. Where is he now?”

He didn’t speak. Mouth agape, his eyes journeyed from the room to the cap to her eyes.

“I will pay any price,” Belle said with stony determination. “I will let you flay me alive, but you must answer me this question: What happened to the boy who used to live here?”

Still silent, Rumpelstiltskin reached out his hand and took the cap away from Belle. His eyes left hers and stayed, downcast, at the object in his hands.

“He never lived here,” he said at last. His voice was blank, deflated. As though there was nothing inside him. “This boy… my son… he never saw this castle.”

“Your son?” Belle whispered, her anger replaced with shock. He had a son? Were there other children, a family? A wife? Had Rumpelstiltskin been an ordinary man before he had been the Dark One?

“He helped me with this, you know.” Rumple pointed out a section of the cap where the knitting was large and inexpert. “He watched me make most of it and he wanted me to teach him. He was so proud of what he had done, what we had made together.”

“You made this?” Belle asked gently. “With your hands?” He spun straw into gold. Had he once been so poor he’d had to work with wool and linen?

“That was the only way I could make things, then. Yes, I knitted this.” He looked up, saw the pile of clothes Belle had gone through. “I made most of these.”

“Oh,” Belle said. That explained the improvement over time. He had learned how to sew as his son had grown. But he hadn’t made the smallest nightgowns, had he? He hadn’t been able to embroider. “What about the boy’s mother?”
He looked at her, his eyes large, full of pain and loss. “She--is another story altogether, Belle.”

“But where is your son?”

He shook his head. “I lost him. I lost them both.”

Belle raised her hand up to her neck, almost over her heart. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

Again, he shook his head. “It was a lifetime ago. Many lifetimes.”

She wanted to reach out to him, but she didn’t dare. “Are these all his things?”

“Everything I have of him I have kept in this room. I thought I’d locked it securely.”

Belle shook her head. “The door opened. I would never have gone in if I thought you wouldn’t want me to.”

“No, of course not.” He straightened up a little. “The cuffs wouldn’t have let you.”

Rumpelstiltskin set the cap down on top of the pile of clothes. “Leave this room, Belle. I’ll thank you not to come here again. There is nothing for you in this place.”

For once, the cuffs were gentle about pulling her out of the room. Their force was as soft as his voice when he gave the order. With her wrists set on the ground, Belle rested on her knees and waited for him to give her another command.

Rumpelstiltskin remained in the room with the door shut for some time. Belle strained her ears, but could hear nothing from inside. No words, no cries, not even footsteps. For all she could tell, he might have vanished himself from the room and gone back to Princess Abigail.

Belle’s heart pounded. He had a son! The little boy who had lived in poverty was the Dark One’s own flesh and blood! There had been a mother as well, a woman he had lost, a woman it pained him to speak of.

She could never have imagined that Rumpelstiltskin had had a family. He made her drink the potion to keep such a thing from happening to her. She had never thought that it might have happened to someone else.

The woman. Had she been his wife? What had happened to her? Rumple had never hinted that there had ever been other lovers, let alone the mother of his child! How long had she been gone? How long had both of them been lost? How long had Rumple mourned the family he had loved?

She had never really thought that the Dark One was the sort to love. Even if he wasn’t a monster, their interactions had hardly been loving. He had taken her as his price. He gave her pleasure and affection and with the same hand doled out punishments and distance. He didn’t love her and she had never thought he would.

But surely he couldn’t have treated his family the same way! He hadn’t given his wife the potion. Rumpelstiltskin’s son had been wanted. Even if the poor man who knitted wool hadn’t been able to conjure up the same potion the Dark One gave his whore, there were ways to keep a child from happening. That boy had been loved. Belle had seen, stitch by stitch, the love Rumple had given his child. The mother must have had the same love. Had they loved each other as well?

It was the oldest story in the world: A man and a woman coming together and making a child. Of course, a marriage was not a guarantee of love, but there was still something in that union that Belle
had never had from Rumpelstiltskin. Could she have such a thing, someday, from him? But what was it that she wanted? How could she ask him for something when she had no words to describe it? And how could she muster up the courage to beg for a thing he would surely never give her?

The door opened and Rumpelstiltskin stepped out. He shut the door firmly and pulled the latch off the wood, making it vanish with a wave of his hand. It would be impossible to open the door now.

He looked at her, his face a smiling mask. “Why so somber, little whore? Are you afraid of getting your punishment?”

Belle blinked, and for the first time she realized how heavy the tears were in her eyes. She hadn’t cried, but her lonely ponderings must have shown on her face.

“No,” she answered. She tried to wipe her eyes, but her hands were still locked to the floor. “I’m not afraid of pain, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“That’s a good thing, because you’re going to get some!” He rocked on his heels, his hands behind his back. “You stole a secret today and I’m going to make you pay for it.”

Eyes on the ground, Belle nodded. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Come along!” he called as he sauntered down the hallway. The cuffs kept Belle down, but pulled her forward, making her crawl on her hands and knees.

He took her to the dining room, then ordered her to take off her robe and stand before him. Rumpelstiltskin circled her body, regarding it appreciatively, with his hands steepled in front of him.

“Mention was made of flaying you alive, my thing. But I think we’ll save that for sometime when you’ve really upset me.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle whispered. He didn’t seem angry. But he had said that she had stolen from him. It had hurt him, she knew, for her to have found the room. She had discovered a secret and demanded an explanation. She had said she would pay any price. And now he would hold her to that.

“Where haven’t I marked you lately?” He brushed her hair off her shoulders to expose the golden thread that covered the worst of her scars. Then his hands trailed down to her breasts, which still had a few red patches from the last time she had sought a punishment. His lips quirked into a small smile as his hands ran down her belly and his fingers brushed against her curls. Belle trembled, but he didn’t stop there. His fingers ran across her hips and tapped playfully against her bottom. “White again?” he asked playfully. “How could that be? How do I not keep you permanently red and welted? How could I have been so criminally neglectful of this perfect arse?”

He slapped her firmly and Belle yelped. The impact threw her off balance and she staggered forward, covering her chest with her arms.

“Jumpy today,” Rumpelstiltskin remarked calmly as she recovered herself. “Why is that?”

Belle’s voice shook as she answered. “I want something,” she confessed. “But I don’t think you want to give it to me.”

“You already got something today, something very precious. What else could satisfy your unquenchable desires?”

She shook her head. He was too hateful right now, too angry, even if he thought he was just playing the game. All of a sudden everything had become too real. She couldn’t push him any further. Not
“You’re going to tell me,” he said, his voice even. “You want to tell me, or else you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

“That’s true,” Belle whispered. “But I don’t want to yet.”

“Yet,” he repeated, enunciating the final sound like the crack of a whip. “Very well, my little whore. You may not know what you want, but I know what I want. Go to the table.”

The cuffs pulled her to the table and locked her into the wood with her arms stretched out and her bottom exposed. Rumpelstiltskin came up to her and delivered a few smacks with his bare hand.

Belle whimpered at the pain, but at the same time it calmed her, helped her focus. Her head and her heart were a jumble of fears and desires and questions that couldn’t be answered by anyone. But the pain was easy to understand. Her body knew exactly what was happening to it.

He stopped slapping her backside. Belle imagined her skin was blushing pink now, her cheeks as bright as a girl at her first dance. Her mind was pleasantly fogged. Everything was becoming easier.

“Can you tell me what you want now, girl?” Rumpelstiltskin leaned over her body, the buttons of his waistcoat cold against her back.

“I want to,” she said dreamily. “But I don’t know the words.”

“What words do you need?”

She shook her head against the wooden table. “Your son,” she muttered. “His mother.”

“What of them?” His voice was tight, strangled. He didn’t want to tell her. He would make her pay if she pressed him.

“You loved them.”

He slammed something heavy onto the table. Instinctively, Belle tensed her body. She wanted to curl into a ball to protect herself, but the cuffs held her firmly to the table.

When his voice came, it was low and dark. “You know more than anyone in this realm who lives. If I had any sense, I would douse you with a potion to make you forget everything you’ve ever learned about me.”

Belle’s eyes widened. “No!” she squeaked. “Please!”

“I know.” With one hand, he rubbed small circles into her back. “I know what will hurt you, Belle. And I know that this,” he hit the table with the heavy object again, “will not deter you from asking more and more questions. But it is the price I set. Are you willing to pay it?”

Belle took a breath. “Yes.”

“Will you tell me what you want before I beat you or after?”

“After,” she whispered. Her mind would be frazzled afterwards, but perhaps that might help. Everything was simpler after a pain game. Perhaps it would be easier to say what she meant to say, to name that unfathomable need that she felt in her heart but could not force her mind to claim.

“Very well,” he said. “After I’ve hurt you and after I’ve fucked you. Then I will know your secret as
“You know mine.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

She felt the impact of the heavy object on both of her cheeks at once. It hit her not just on her skin, but deep into her muscles and against her bones. The noise Belle made was low and guttural, like a growling animal.

He hit her again and Belle felt the walls of her mind blast away. There was nothing but the pain now, nothing but the hits and the moments of eternity between them.

He didn’t make her count. That was just as well because she couldn’t remember any numbers at the moment. Each strike was like a clap of thunder that shook the earth with its power. Belle began a moan that became a shriek and ended as a thousand sobs. The pain was continuous--like a constant ringing in her ears--a noise she couldn’t even think of escaping.

At one point, Rumpelstiltskin paused to grip the table top in his hands. He pulled the table backwards, with Belle still lying on it. A small, groggy part of Belle’s mind reasoned that he must have hit her so hard he’d moved the table. Her backside was certainly no longer pink.

Dimly, she heard the heavy object land on the ground with a *thud*. Was he done? Behind her, Belle felt cool air move gently across her burning flesh. He didn’t touch her where he’d hit her. She didn’t feel his hands until he was holding up her ankles and spreading her legs apart.

His fingers slid into her cunt and he snarled his pleasure at what he found there. “You perfect whore,” he muttered. “Always wet no matter what I do to you.” Careful not to touch her bruises, Rumpelstiltskin pushed his cock inside her.

They were still for a moment, as their flesh became one. For the space of two breaths, neither of them moved.

Then, quickly and without warning, Rumpelstiltskin thrust his weight against Belle’s bruised backside. She *screamed*. He didn’t stop and she didn’t want him to. His body banged against her again and again and again.

Her hips rose and bucked against him and even Belle had no way to know if her body was fighting him or encouraging him. She kept her eyes closed, but still saw a bright white flash every time he pressed against skin. It had never been like this before. It had never been this intense.

He came with a cry, pushing his leather-clad breeches against her naked bruises as he filled her cunt with his seed. Rumpelstiltskin lay on her back and she could feel him panting underneath his clothes.

The cuffs were still holding her onto the table. If they weren’t, Belle knew she would fall to the ground. Probably, she would land on her ass and the pain of that was a thought she could not dwell on.

Belle breathed, and with every breath she came back to herself a little more.

Rolling off of her, Rumpelstiltskin let out a sigh and then a chuckle. “It’s remarkable,” he said, still panting. “It’s just fucking. How do you make it so good?”

Slowly, with a breath between each motion, Belle turned her head to look at him. He was looking back at her, his eyes shining, his smile genuine. He reached out one hand and cupped her cheek.

“Are you alright?” he asked.
Closing her eyes, Belle nodded into his hand. She was alright. He had dealt to her a pain she had never known, but he had also given her a part of himself she’d never had before. It was fair. It was good.

“Can you speak, my dear?”

Belle took a breath and said, “Yes.”

He grinned at her. “You know that isn’t what I like to hear.”

Even in this state, she tried to smile. “Yes, Rumple-stbilskin.” Her lips faltered over the syllables of his name. But he just laughed and pulled her into his arms.

The cuffs released her and Belle put her hands to her face and wiped away her tears. Rumpelstiltskin held her, one arm over her shoulders and the other gently rubbing at her new bruises.

“You are a pretty purple thing today,” he told her. “You took your punishment so well.”

Belle rested on his chest and nodded into the leather of his coat.

“But there was something else I wanted from you. Do you remember?”

Her mind still hazy, Belle closed her eyes to concentrate. “You want… to know what I want.”

“Good girl. You told me you want something from me that you think I don’t want to give you. What is it?”

Punishment had made Belle react just as she had thought it would. In the usual, wonderful, paradox, while her mind was cloudy her heart was clear. She could now name what she wanted: “More.”

“More pain?” Rumpelstiltskin asked gently. “Or more pleasure?”

Belle shook her head. “More of you.”

His body stiffened even as he held her. “Me?” he asked in his impish voice. “What do I have to offer a pretty thing like you?”

He was being obtuse and Belle had no patience for it, not now. “You know,” she muttered indignantly. “You hide from me. And I don’t want you to. You hide.” By way of demonstration, she pulled weakly at the lapels of his coat. He was wearing a waistcoat underneath, and a shirt underneath that. Layers and layers kept him from the outside world, while Belle huddled naked in his arms. “It’s not fair.”

“Alright,” he placed a kiss on her head, patted her hair down. “Thank you for telling me what you want. I’ll keep it under advisement. Did I tend to your hair this morning?”

Belle shook her head. “You just pleasured me and then left.”

“How careless of me. Do you think you can stand?”

“I’ll stand better than I’ll sit for a while,” she answered as he helped her up.

Swaying on her feet, Belle stood between Rumpelstiltskin’s legs while he sat on the tabletop and combed her hair. As always, he was gentle and patient with her hair, starting from the ends and working his way up to her head. They were quiet while he worked on her. Belle was still too shaken for real conversation, and Rumpelstiltskin was too absorbed in his task.
“I didn’t feed you either, did I?” he asked when her curls were finally smooth and neat.

“No,” Belle said simply.

Behind her, he sighed. “Careless,” he said again. “Your tray is on the carpet.”

And so it was. Belle went to the fireplace and knelt gingerly. She knew better than to rest her bottom on the ground. How long would the pain from tonight linger?

Fortunately, Rumpelstiltskin had left her hands free, so it was easy for her to pick up the pastry-wrapped sausages he provided. She ate her fill while he stayed at the table. He watched her like he always did, but when she tried to catch his eye, he frowned and looked away.

“Bed time?” he suggested brightly when she was done.

“I suppose so,” Belle answered. “Unless you want me for something else.”

He scoffed. “You are a greedy girl, my slut. There’s no more for you tonight.”

She nodded. Fair enough. “Will you walk with me? Back to the cell?”

For a moment, it looked as though he would deny her or at least question her motives. But then the moment passed and he nodded. “If that’s what you want, my dear.”

Belle was steady as they went through the castle. She didn’t really require an escort, but she still felt needful for Rumpelstiltskin’s presence. It baffled her, the hunger she had for him. The need was no better now than it had been this morning. How did she ache for him even after he had left her aching?

“How was your business?” Belle asked, mostly to cover the noise of her own thoughts.

Rumpelstiltskin gave a satisfied nod. “Pieces are falling into place as they should.”

“What did Princess Abigail want with you?”

“Well,” he said slyly, “what she wanted was not what I gave her.”

“Oh?” Belle recognized his tone. “What did you give her?”

“I merely informed her of the existence of a lake that brings back that which is lost. If, of course, one can defeat the lake’s powerful guardian. So now the richest princess in all the lands will be on the lookout for a warrior of uncommon strength and cunning. I hope she finds one.”

“What did she lose?”

“I was going to find out but then someone interrupted me.”

Belle bit her lip. “I’m glad you told me,” she admitted. “I mean, I’m glad I know. That the boy was your son. And that you loved him.”

“What did you think had happened?” he asked, suddenly serious. “When you called me, you were afraid for the boy’s safety. You thought I had done something terrible to a child, didn’t you?”

They were in front of the cell door now. Belle swallowed. “I was afraid, yes. But it didn’t make sense. It didn’t… seem like something you would do. I knew there was more to it.”
“More,” Rumpelstiltskin said quietly. “And you still want more of this? More of me?”

Without hesitation, Belle nodded. “I do, yes.”

He nodded with a look of slow bewilderment. “Remarkable,” he said to himself. “Good night, Belle.” he kissed her on the forehead. “Try to think of something pleasant, when you touch yourself tonight. You’ve had enough awful thoughts for one day.

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle smiled. “Good night.”
The Thread

Chapter Summary

Belle gets a little tied up in something

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Be sure not to miss last week's chapter. I know with me skipping a week but posting my away message as a chapter, things might have gotten confusing. But Chapter 17: The Cap is live and it's not one anybody wants to miss!

Rumpelstiltskin was very prompt with her breakfast the next morning. There was only the gray light of dawn when he appeared in the middle of the cell to wake her. Without him having to ask, Belle took off her blanket, knelt on the ground, and kissed his boots. He produced the breakfast tray and she stayed on the floor. She ate flat cakes with her hands and sucked sticky treacle off her fingers.

He licked his lips as he watched her.

“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle said when she had finished.

He reached down and wiped away a bit of treacle from her lips. “You’re quite welcome.”

“You’re going to spin today.” It wasn’t a question. He only woke her before sunrise when he wanted to spend all the daylight hours in his tower.

“Yes.” He kept his hand on her face, rubbing his thumb against her lips over and over.

“May I join you?”

His fingers stilled. “You don’t have to. You have every freedom to explore the castle, take your exercise. I might have hidden your book somewhere for you to find it.”

Belle shook her head, nuzzling her face into his palm. “I do love reading that book, but I would just as soon spend the day in your company. If I am permitted.”

Rumpelstiltskin pulled his hand away and began to circle her. He was thinking. “You would have to be careful in the tower. I cannot have you poking at my spells.”

“Never, Rumpelstiltskin,” she agreed.

“But you could sit at my feet while I spin. That would be pleasant.”

“I think so too.”

“Very well.” He extended a finger at her to deliver a stern warning. “But you must be vigilant for your own safety. If you get yourself turned into dust, I will not be bothered to fetch a broom. I’ll just
kick you around as I walk and make the whole room filthy with your remains.”

Belle snorted as he helped her up. “I’ll be careful, Rumpelstiltskin.”

It had been a while since she had been to his tower. The windows--some of the few uncovered windows in the castle--spanned from the floor to the ceiling on the eastern and western sides. Through the eastern window, the sun was just peeking over the mountains. Rumpelstiltskin’s spinning wheel was set in front of the window, ready to catch the light for as long as it lasted.

The ceiling vaulted over their heads, white plaster reflecting more light. The walls were dark-panelled wood, the same color as the floorboards. There were different cupboards, some locked securely, some open enough to reveal lines of jars or racks of golden thread. A worktable occupied a third of the room. It was crowded with bottles and herbs and powders, strange equipment that Belle could only guess the use for.

“I think I’ve seen this instrument in alchemy texts,” she said as she peered into an oblong vial, her hands safely behind her back.

“Alchemy is magic for humans who can’t do magic,” Rumpelstiltskin said as he walked past her. “I don’t need a silly rock to live forever or make gold. But potion-making requires precise calibration so I’ll thank you to not touch the instruments.” He spun on his heel to face her. “Actually, I’ll do more than thank you, I’ll order you: Belle, don’t touch anything in this room that I do not put directly into your hands.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” she said. At his word, the cuffs gripped her wrists. They didn’t pull her yet, because she had made no more to touch anything. But she could feel them waiting for her to try, waiting to keep her from disobeying. “Does that include the books?”

There were books everywhere. Shelves lined the walls, open books were scattered across the worktable, stacks of books tilted precariously on the floor, rising up like stalagmites in a cave. Belle yearned to pick them up and hold them gently, read them thoroughly, and set them all neatly back on the shelves.

“These books? Without question. Magic books are not meant for mortal eyes.”

She sighed. “Fine.”

“You’re the one who wanted to join me. It’s not my fault there’s nothing here to entertain you.”

“Well, you can hardly dangle books in front of me and then tell me I can’t read them.”

“Yes I can,” he giggled. “It’s quite easy!”

Belle rolled her eyes but chuckled as well. Rumpelstiltskin was so singularly himself. She could not begrudge him his peculiarities.

He sat on a stool in front of his spinning wheel and Belle sat on the ground at his feet. He patted her hair as she settled in, twisting a lock between his fingers before moving away. With the same motion, he began on the straw, twisting it into the orifice of the wheel, working it to make gold.

Belle watched the wheel for a while. Her mind filled with wonderings at what she saw. What would have happened if he had kept spinning her hair? Could he spin anything into gold or did it only work on straw? What would happen if he spun something like hay, or stalks of lavender? Or flax, as was used to make linen? What would happen if he spun wool? Perhaps he couldn’t do something so mundane as to spin wool into yarn. Perhaps it would all come out as gold.
She couldn’t quite imagine that he could spin silver or copper or iron, no matter what material he
spun it from. A thread of iron would probably be more impressive than the same thing in gold—even
if the gold was more valuable. Belle imagined a set of armor knitted or woven out of iron threads, a
weave so thick an arrow couldn’t pierce it. Or what if he could turn glass into a thread, thin and loose
and transparent. Wouldn’t that be a marvel?

Belle’s thoughts shifted to Rumpelstiltskin. His posture was different when he spun. He was both
more focused and more relaxed. It was rare for her to see him comfortable. Normally, if
Rumpelstiltskin was still, he was focused on something—on her, usually. He studied her with an
intensity that threatened to burn a hole through her flesh and into her heart. But if he was relaxed, it
was with a sprawling air of distraction, as though he were a bored youth seeking entertainment.

But when he spun, he seemed at ease, purposeful. His hands worked steadily, bringing up more
straw from the basket at his feet. He moved, slightly, in rhythm with the wheel, leaning in as he
pumped the treadle with one foot, pulling back as the wheel spun around and around. It was as
though he had become a part of the wheel, absorbed by it. His very breath had synchronized with the
spinning.

Was it always like this? Had spinning always entranced him? For how long had he been a spinner?
Belle thought of the little room she had found, the little boy who had been Rumpelstiltskin’s son. The
Dark One had made clothes for the child, sewn and knitted. Had he spun as well, when his son had
been with him? It was normally women who spun wool, a constant task on top of all their other
work. It wasn’t something men did.

All the items in the little room had belonged to a poor boy. Those clothes had not been spun from
gold. Had Rumpelstiltskin been unable to provide for his family? What had happened to the mother?
Why was he the one who made and mended all the clothes? The boy had never seen the castle.
When had everything changed?

Belle blinked and shook her head to clear it of questions. There was so much she didn’t know of
Rumpelstiltskin, so much that he would never want to tell her. His past, his true nature—she would
only earn those secrets with her blood. It was worth it, Belle reasoned, but it would take time. He
gave her parts of himself piece by piece, and always made her wait for more. She would have to
cope with the ache of her curiosity, a pain in her heart no different than the pains in her body.

Suddenly melancholy, Belle turned her face away from the wheel. She kissed Rumpelstiltskin’s
boots, pressing her closed eyes against the work-worn leather that covered his calf.

As soon as she touched him, the hum of the wheel paused, the rhythm broken. “Do you want
something?”

She shook her head against his foot. “I just don’t want to look at it anymore.”

He might have nodded. He certainly began spinning again. Belle rested with her head on his boot,
her back to the wheel. She tried to rest her body, but soon found herself growing bored.

From the ground, Belle could see very little of the tower. The undersides of tables, the undersides of
bookshelves, the inlaid wooden floor. She rolled onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. The sun
was not shining through either the eastern or western windows, which meant it was probably
afternoon. He would spin until sunset. Even with the nights coming earlier now, it would still be
hours until he was done.

Belle sighed loudly. This had been a foolish idea. He had told her that he was going to work. There
was nothing for her here in this tower, not if he wouldn’t let her touch anything or talk to him.
Rumpelstiltskin’s body shifted and he stopped pumping the treadle. He actually stood up and took a bobbin of gold thread off of the flyer. Belle looked up. Was it over? Had he finished? Crawling on the floor to get a better look, she watched him. He walked over to one of the locked cupboards and placed the ball of thread on a shelf next to a hundred other balls of thread. Then he went back to the wheel with an empty bobbin and took another handful of straw.

Belle slapped a hand over her eyes and groaned. He was starting all over again? Didn’t he have enough? What did he need so much gold for anyway?

“Something troubling you, my girl?”

“Why do you need to spin so much?” Frustration had made Belle impertinent. “You already have more gold than you could ever spend. Why keep at it?”

“It passes the time, for one thing. Immortality leaves one with quite a lot of time on one’s hands. And I like spinning, watching the wheel…” he trailed off and shook his head. “But something I don’t think you understand, little thing, is that I don’t spin gold to spend it.” He went back to the cupboard and picked up a ball of thread. “This is magic,” he explained. “Versatile, transportable, inherently valuable magic. It has many uses.”

Belle looked up at the spool of thread. The cuffs forced her hands to stay in her lap. “You sewed me up with golden thread.”

“And that’s only one of the more obvious uses. Here,” he held out the ball for her. “Here’s some magic you can play with. It won’t hurt you.”

Belle made a show of pulling her hands against the unyielding cuffs. “I can’t take it.”

Rumpelstiltskin tsked and shook his head. “One must play by the rules.” Still holding the ball, he bent at the waist and put the gold directly into Belle’s open hands.

She grasped on to the thread and was able to pick up the ball and hold it in front of her face. The cuffs relaxed their grip.

“Now if you can keep yourself busy with that until I’ve finished my work, then I shall lavish you with attention until bedtime. How does that sound?”

Belle shrugged. “It’s better than nothing.”

“But you cannot disturb me again! Shall I order you to keep silent or will be able to obey me on your own?”

“Your orders don’t work on my voice, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He grinned at her. “I could rip out your tongue, but then what good would you be? Stay silent, my thing, no matter what.”

Belle nodded and tapped her fingers against her closed lips.

“And take your robe off,” he ordered as sat at the wheel again.

Without speaking, Belle gave his back a questioning look. Why did he want her to be naked if he was going to make a point of not looking at her? But the cuffs were already pulling her hands to open the robe and slide it off her shoulders. She was naked now, standing in the Dark One’s workroom, holding a ball of his magic golden thread in her hands.
She unspooled a little of the thread, winding it around her forefinger. The gold remained about the size of a stalk of straw—much larger than any proper sewing thread. But thinking of it as twine or yarn seemed wrong. It was thread. Rumpelstiltskin had made it and he had given it to her to play with.

Holding on to the end around her finger, Belle tossed the bobbin underhand along the ground. For a split second she worried that the ball would roll into the fireplace and she would be compelled to pull the metal out of the flames with her bare hands without making any noise that might disturb Rumpelstiltskin.

But the arc of her toss led the ball away from the fireplace, and she was able to walk over to it when it stopped.

Thread trailed behind her as she walked over to the ball. She picked it up and this time she threw it up into the air. The bobbin rotated as it flew up and sank down, unthreading more and more. Feeling rather like a cat, Belle tossed the ball up a few more times, catching it in her hands. It was a silly, childish game. But fun. The gold on the floor was a pile now, spreading out at her feet.

Belle rolled the ball along the ground again and it stopped behind the worktable. When she went to go get the ball, her feet tripped over all the thread she had spilled and she landed on her knees. From the ground she could see what a mess she had made, tangles of thread everywhere. It would be best to wind the ball back up, even if she only ended up unwinding it again later. Thinking nothing of crawling over to the ball, Belle found the golden thing and began to pull the thread back to its source while she was still seated on the ground.

The thread had become as badly tangled as her hair. A mass of gold tendrils covered her feet entirely. The mess only seemed to grow larger and more knotted as she worked to untangle it. She held the ball in one hand and tried to follow the loose thread into the morass of gold with her other hand. Belle pulled the main bundle into her lap and rested it on her closed legs.

Had Rumpelstiltskin done this on purpose? He had given her a simple but maddening puzzle, one she was determined to solve. Had he known that she would take to it so? Did he know her so well or was she merely that predictable? Either way, she was entertained, as he had promised. This tangle would keep her pleasantly occupied for some time.

When she had sorted her way through a particularly rough patch, Belle stretched her legs in front of her and laid back on the ground. Grinning to herself, she spread her arms wide and matched them with her legs—or tried to. It was the oddest thing. Her legs wouldn’t open. What was wrong? She had just moved them, but why couldn’t she spread them? Pushing herself up, Belle moved the pile of gold off her lap and looked at her legs.

Her first thought was that they had gotten tangled in the thread. But then she saw the twists and knots, the artful design of having the thread tie her both above and below the knees. She was tied up at the ankles too. Even her two largest toes were bound together. Golden thread covered her in knots from the waist down.

This was not a regular tangle.

On the other side of the room, Rumpelstiltskin was still at his wheel. Turned away from her, his back was ramrod straight. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t spoken, hadn’t escaped from his trance since he had sent Belle off to play with the thread.

She bit her lip against the laughter that was threatening to bubble up out of her heart. He had ordered her to stay silent until he finished his work. Surely any sounds of delight would disturb him. But she
couldn’t stop herself from smiling.

This was one of their games. He wasn’t ignoring her while he worked at the wheel. He was playing with her through the thread he had ordered her to play with. If only the threads weren’t binding her legs together and keeping her from touching her secret places. She wanted to feel how wet this game was making her.

She went back to untangling the threads in her hands. Now that she knew what was happening, she was able to detect a pressure against her waist as the thread moved up her body. Her thighs were pressed to her chest anyway, so it was hardly surprising when she found she couldn’t pull them away. The thread crept up her arms and down her back, as gentle as Rumpelstiltskin’s grazing touches.

There was pain as the thread pressed against the edges of the bruises he had made the day before. Belle could imagine the gold contrasting with her black-and-blue markings as the thread framed her bottom.

Being tied up slowly filled her with the same feeling that being beaten filled her with quickly. Such a strange, heady combination of peace and panic. She felt aware of everything happening in her body, but also aware that she could do nothing about it. She was helpless and powerless and utterly content.

It only became a problem when the thread bound her elbows to her knees and then wound itself around her hands, lacing itself securely around the cuffs. And even then, that only bothered her because she couldn’t work on the knot anymore and she had almost solved it.

Now Belle sat on the floor, tied up and completely immobilized. She had full freedom to move her head and look around the tower. But her back was bent over her front. Every part of her body was bound to another part of her body. It didn’t hurt, it was barely even uncomfortable. The sun was sinking low in the windows. Rumpelstiltskin was still working at his wheel.

It was easier to wait for him, now that she had no other option. She was confined in a golden cage, but she felt as safe as she would if she were in his arms. It was a good feeling.

How delightful to know that she was doing exactly what he wanted her to do, and she would never be called upon to do anything more or be anything more than what she was: An object for his pleasure. His thing. His.

Belle closed her eyes and allowed the feelings--the safety, the peace, the trembling arousal--wash over her and fill her up. When she opened her eyes again, the sky was dark and the hum of the spinning wheel had stilled.

“Now what did you do to yourself?” It was his bright voice, playful. He had gotten up from the wheel and was standing in front of her, examining the threadwork on her body. “How did you manage all that?”

Remembering his order, Belle blinked up at him and stayed silent.

His face broke into a wide smile. “Speak to me, sweet Belle. How do you feel?”

“Good,” she whispered, too overwhelmed to speak more loudly.

“Do you want me to let you out?”

She shook her head. “I imagine you have more planned for me right now.”
He waggled his eyebrows at her and Belle felt her insides clench. Oh, she wanted him. Not just to ask a question, not just to be his thing, but she wanted him inside her, pleasuring her as only he could. She wanted Rumplestiltskin, just as much as he wanted her.

“Let me look at you.” His footsteps echoed around her, his brown boots tapping lightly on the wooden floor. His hands brushed across her skin, admiring the design of his gold.

Then he wrapped his fingers around the threads at her back and picked Belle up as though she were a trussed chicken he was bringing home from market. He carried her at his side and she swung in time with his steps. Belle was completely helpless, and though she was shocked to be so carried, she had no fear. He was too strong to drop her accidentally, and if he was going to manhandle her on purpose, then that was his right. Whatever happened was what he wanted to happen. Belle trusted him completely.

Rumple set her down gently in front of his stool, so her body was between the spinning wheel and where he sat.

“I’ve been thinking about this all day,” he confided. “The thread from this batch will be quite special, I can assure you.”

She was sitting between his legs, she realized. On her knees, so her face was at the level of his groin. He scooted his stool even closer to her, close enough that he could reach over her and still hold onto the wheel. He held her hair in one hand, and a bundle of straw in the other.

Belle looked from the straw to his groin to his face. “Couldn’t I have been doing this to you all day anyway?”

Rumplestiltskin shrugged. “I want to find out what lustful thoughts will do to the thread, and there was no need to risk a regular day’s work on an experiment. Besides,” his fingers ran down her cheek, touched her nose and her chin, “delayed gratification is its own reward.”

The fireplace was behind him, so his body was still in shadow when he pushed her head slowly over his rigid cock. Belle opened her mouth to take him in. He kept one hand in her hair—guiding her, steadying her—and with the other he spun his straw into gold.

It was odd to have him distracted during this intimate act. Normally, it was the only time he was fully still. When she had his cock in her mouth, Belle had become used to having his undivided attention.

But now he was moving with the wheel and that threw Belle off her own rhythm. His eyes, she knew, were not closed in rapture nor looking down at the sight of himself filling her, but were glazed over and steadily staring at the straw. He had said he was expecting lustful thoughts, but Belle could feel it happening the other way around. Instead of pleasure affecting the thread, spinning was affecting his enjoyment.

Jealous that his devotion to his magic was spoiling her time with him, and determined to pull his attention back to her, Belle broke the first rule Rumplestiltskin had given her about how to pleasure him with her mouth.

She bit him.

It was nothing much. Just a little extra pressure with her teeth and then she went right back to sucking and licking and kissing. But Rumplestiltskin jolted upright in his seat, his breath shaking like he had been struck by lightning.

The wheel forgotten, he twisted both hands into her hair and pulled her away from him. Pain shot
through her scalp and Belle let out a noise that was both a giggle and a shriek. At least she had his attention.

“You’re right,” he hissed, his claws still pressing into her head. “I don’t know how you knew it, but yes, I wasn’t giving you the attention I promised. But next time that happens, I trust you will find a gentler means of communication. Hmm?”

Belle nodded and opened her mouth again to continue her work, licking along the length of him.

“I ought to punish you for that little stunt, my whore.” But then his hands went down from her hair to her shoulders, and Belle could feel him relax and go loose on the stool. He wasn’t spinning any more. “But how can I punish a girl who makes a game of misery?”

She pushed herself further onto his cock, trying as always to fit all of him inside her at once. She had done it before, but it was still difficult, a skill she had to practice at.

“What am I to do with you?” he mused, his speech almost slurring in its contentment.

Being tied in a spool of thread didn’t have much effect on how she was able to pleasure him. It was like when the cuffs pinned her on her knees. The only difference was that when the cuffs bound her she was secured. Now she was bound only to her own body and she could lose her balance and fall if Rumpelstiltskin wasn’t there to support her.

But he did support her. He contained her between his knees and held her up by her shoulders. He would catch her if she fell. He would make sure she was safe. He cared for her.

Rocking back on her heels Belle pulled away from his cock, coughing and panting. The thought had affected her more than his body. \textit{He cared for her.} It was true, wasn’t it? He was attentive to her needs, he enjoyed her company. He wanted her to feel safe around him. That couldn’t just be desire or courtesy. \textit{He cared}. Rumpelstiltskin, the Dark One, cared about her.

“I haven’t worn you out, have I?”

Even that question, that gentle admonition, was spoken in the language of concern. He would stop if she said yes.

“No,” Belle took a breath before she began again. “I’m not going to stop.”

Redoubling her efforts, Belle began to lick and suck at his manhood. She covered him with kisses and opened her mouth wide to swallow him again and again. His hands grabbed at her, clutching at the threads, gripping her hair. The strangled noises of his pleasure were the sweetest song Belle had ever heard.

As he came closer to his orgasm, Belle noticed his breath quicken. He clutched at her body more tightly and began to jerk his hips as though he were inside her. She found herself aware of these signs in a way she had never been before. She knew what was coming. She was able to take a breath just before he spat into her mouth. This was the first time she was prepared to take his seed.

He came inside her mouth and she did not gag and she did not spit. The sensation was still odd and her stomach roiled a little, but she was able to control her body’s impulses. She held his seed in her mouth as he sighed and whispered, “Good girl.”

The thread still held her and she still held his semen. Belle leaned herself onto Rumpelstiltskin’s leg and let herself fall to his feet. She rolled onto the floor so that she was facing one of his boots. Then Belle opened her mouth and let his seed fall onto the leather.
Immediately, she licked it up. She kissed the liquid back into her mouth. Swallowing the black drops one by one was easier than taking all of it at once. She licked the leather clean after that, and kissed his boots again and again until he pulled her up by the threads on her back.

His face, when he looked at her, was wide-eyed and loosely smiling. “Do you have a question for me, Belle?”

She licked her lips. “Did I earn a question?”

“You know you did.”

“Was it holding your seed that earned it?”

He set her down. “Anyone who can even imagine pleasuring me without gagging has earned a pot of gold.”

“But I did gag.”

He chuckled and kept his hands on her body, feeling her flesh between the threads. “You turn gagging into a compliment, sweet whore. What do you want, my Belle? What is your price?”

She rested against his knee, nuzzling her face into the soft leather of his trousers. “Can you spin straw into anything? Or is it just gold?”

“Gold is inherently magical,” he answered. “No other metal drives men mad in pursuit of it. And straw is in ready supply, it isn’t good for much else.”

“You can feed animals with it.”

“That would be like feeding you flour cut with sawdust, my dear. It will do in a starving time, but not for long. Besides, I like my method: I take something no one wants, and make it into something everyone wants. There is great satisfaction to be found in hoodwinking people like that.”

“But it is really gold? Not fairy gold or fool’s gold?”

“I’m sure I’m a fool, but I’m not a fairy. No, any goldsmith, any alchemist, any mining dwarf can look at my gold and tell you it’s pure. Pure magic makes it so.”

“Mmm,” Belle hummed happily. Her eyes closed as she put her weight on him.

“Are you tired, little one?”

She nodded. “Well you can’t sleep like that!” He stood up suddenly and Belle found herself teetering back and forth. He caught her before she could hit the floor, grabbing her by the threads at her chest and using one hand to hold her up to his eye level. “There is a slow way and a quick way to do this. Do you have a preference?”

After a moment, she was able to focus on his question. “Does the quick way hurt?”

“Not unless I want it to.”

“Then quick, please, with no hurting.”

“As you wish.” He crooked one finger between a thread and her skin and pulled the thread up sharply away from her. It moved quickly over Belle’s body, untying her and winding itself back on
Without warning, Belle’s body went limp and loose. All the control that had been exerted on her, used to contain her, was suddenly gone. Just as quickly, Rumpelstiltskin caught her up in his arms. He clasped her to his chest as though afraid to let her fall.

He took her to the work table and sat down on the bench with her laid out in front of him. Gently, he stretched out her limbs and rubbed her skin. Belle’s flesh tingled under his touch. The thread had left bright pink imprints on her arms and legs.

“You’ve never marked me like this before,” she said.

His lips quirked into a smile. “Did you like it?”

Belle nodded. “It was good.”

“Only good?” he tutted. “I should have fingered you, my girl. Should have made you come so hard you’d break the thread. Then tied you up with double the thread and seen if you could break those bonds.”

A shiver went through her body. “I would like that.”

He bent over and kissed her on the mouth. “Next time. Try to sit up.”

She was able to sit and move her hands, and she could stand and walk when he asked her to. She stood at the top of the stairs, thinking before she went down. “I should go back to the cell.”

“Are you certain, my dear?” He stayed by the table.

Belle looked at him, blinking. “Where else is there for me to go?”

Rumpelstiltskin opened his mouth to speak, but then shook his head. “To the dungeons it is, I suppose.”

“Will you walk with me?”

He picked up her robe from the floor and handed it to her. “Of course, sweet girl.”

They were companionably silent until they reached the cell door. Rumpelstiltskin always seemed on the verge of saying something, but he never did. Belle’s head was still too fuzzy for her to mention his distraction.

“Tell me this, my sweet. What will you think of tonight, when you touch yourself?”

Belle bit her lips against a smile, “You asked a very interesting question earlier. I’ll probably be giving it some thought.”

“What question is that, my dear?”

“How you should punish a girl who likes punishments.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s grin was even naughtier than hers. “Let me know what you think of, sweet slut. We can compare notes in the morning.”

And with a kiss on her cheek and a swat on her behind, Rumpelstiltskin wished Belle a good night.
Belle hadn’t thought it was possible for the nights to get colder. It was always such a shock when she entered her cell, to have the air freeze in her chest and the gooseflesh raise on her skin like she had just bolted outside without a cloak.

Even though she was still in the castle, her cell was open to the elements. The wind blew through the glassless windows, the damp crept from the earth and into her bones. Her robe was useless. Every night, her teeth began to chatter as soon as she left Rumpelstiltskin.

Cocooning herself in the blanket he had given her, Belle slept with her wash rag covering her face. It always gave off steam and Belle used that heat to warm the air before it entered her lungs. The nights were long now, and she spent more time shivering than sleeping.

If Rumpelstiltskin minded her misery, he didn’t mention it. He would wake her up in the morning and give her breakfast as usual. Perhaps he wanted her to be cold. Perhaps it was one of his games.

He must have noticed, Belle reasoned; how could he not? Sometimes she shivered so badly she couldn’t speak until after he had filled her with hot porridge. He was always quick to remove her from the dungeon. That was a comfort. It had been some time since he made her pleasure him in the cell. More often, they would couple on the carpet in front of the fireplace in the dining room. Then she would serve him tea and he would mete out whatever punishment he wanted her to take that day. Sometimes he would allow her a question. And at the end of the day she would go back to her cell. He often walked with her and bade her a pleasant sleep.

So he knew how cold it was. Surely he knew. Surely it was his will that she remain in her cell and brave the winter as best she could. Knowing this, Belle didn’t complain. It was part of the game to pretend you weren’t playing. She could do that. She could endure. She could withstand any pain, as long as it gave him pleasure.

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“Wake up, Belle!”

The voice was high-pitched. Strange and familiar all at once. It was frightened.

Something was shaking her. Keeping her from sleeping. She resisted. Whimpered. It was better to be asleep. Better to stay in the darkness.

Hot hands on her arms. They pulled her up. Pulled her out of the darkness. Pulled her away from sleep.
“Open your eyes, Belle.”

Rumple’s voice. Trembling. Never heard that before.

If it was Rumple, she wanted to obey him. She tried to open her eyes. But they wouldn’t open. They hurt too much. Her whole face hurt.

Everything hurt.

There was a weight on her, cold and wet. Colder than the air. So heavy. Rumpelstiltskin pulled the weight off her body, then he pulled off her robe. Pain like fire coursed up and down her limbs. But how could there be fire when she was cold? So cold.

His hands were on her face now. His warm fingers rubbed over her closed eyes. “Look at me,” he ordered roughly. “Look at me, Belle!”

With his help, she was able to open one eye. His face. He had never looked like this before. His eyes were wide and wild, his jaw clenched. His hands were on her. Clutching her. He was trembling as badly as she was shivering. He was afraid.

She opened her mouth but no words came out. “Rumple,” she managed on a second try.

“I’m here.” He picked her up in his arms and pulled her to his chest. He took the blanket and covered her with it. But the blanket was cold. And It was white. Why was it white? It was normally as blue as the sky.

Belle rested her head on his collarbone. A bit of skin around his throat wasn’t covered by his shirt or his high leather collar. He was warm.

“What happened, Rumple?”

“Snow,” he answered. His voice still shook. “It came in through the window and piled on your blanket. Your body must have warmed it enough to melt into the cloth. And then it froze again.” His claws gripped in to the flesh of her legs. “You could have died, Belle. You still could, even now while I’m dithering!”

He took them away. Still in his arms, Belle saw his wine-red smoke all around them. When it cleared they were in the dining room in front of the fireplace. Rumpelstiltskin set her down on the carpet, unwrapping her from the blanket. He still held it in his hands.

With a flick of his wrist, he snapped the blanket in the air. The snow flew away from the fabric and landed in clumps on the floor. The fire sputtered in the hearth, but quickly recovered and kept blazing. When Rumpelstiltskin wrapped the blanket around Belle’s shoulders, it was dry. The once-frozen thing was now warm as a roaring fire.

Even with this new comfort, it hurt for Belle to breathe. It hurt to think. It hurt to move. She sat on the carpet and rubbed her arms. Her hands on her body were like ice trying to melt ice.

Through half-closed eyes, Belle watched Rumpelstiltskin go to the fire. Bending at the waist, he reached in and with his bare hands he pulled out a glowing orange coal. The light in the burning wood pulsed gently, almost like a heartbeat. He held the coal in the fingers of one hand while it still burned. As he waved his other hand over the coal, Belle saw the fire turn from orange to red to pink. It still glowed with flame, but was the color of cooked beef once you cut into it.

“Open your mouth,” he ordered.
Belle obeyed. He crouched beside her and placed the pink-burning coal on her tongue. The fire extinguished and the coal dissolved as soon as she closed her mouth. It tasted ashy and burnt, but the heat of it went up into her head and down into her throat. It filled her entire body from the inside out. She blinked and coughed and smoke wafted out of her mouth.

Rumpelstiltskin was still beside her. He was calmer now, though he stared at her intently.

"Can you stretch out, Belle? Can you move your arms and legs?"

The pain had departed with the chill when she had swallowed the coal. Belle extended her legs and raised her arms above her head.

"Will you wiggle your fingers for me? Your toes?"

She did both, and felt a little childish for it.

He looked at her face, his brow furrowed in deep concern. "Can you wiggle your nose?"

"No," Belle answered. "But I couldn’t do it before either. I can raise my eyebrows, though." She demonstrated, making faces at Rumpelstiltskin to show off how nothing had frozen.

He shook his head with a sigh. "How do you feel?"

"Better," Belle answered seriously. "Much warmer, much more awake. Thank you." She moved to kiss his boots, but he held her back. His hands on her shoulders kept her away from him.

"Did you do this on purpose, Belle? Did you want to die?"

Belle blinked at him. "No!" she said. "Nothing like that."

"How long has it been that way?" He was angry now, but Belle knew if she mentioned it, he would say he was just being stern. "How long has your cell been unlivable?"

Belle moved on from blinking to gaping. "Since you put me there, Rumple. It has always been cold and damp and terrible. It’s a dungeon! I--I thought that was the point."

In one movement, Rumpelstiltskin rocked back on his heels and stood up. He walked away from her and began to pace. The fingers of one hand rubbed against each other, the same motion he used to twist straw before he spun it.

"You thought I wanted this for you," he said after a moment. His tone was resigned, matter-of-fact. "You thought I wanted to put you in danger."

"Yes?" Belle said slowly, only now realizing that he didn’t. "I thought it was a game."

"No," he whispered. "No, I would never hurt you without being there. There’s no pleasure in that, not for me."

"Oh," Belle said. She adjusted the blanket around her shoulders, even though she wasn’t really cold enough to need it anymore.

Rumpelstiltskin sighed heavily and flopped into his armchair, one hand covering his eyes. "You could have asked," he said. "It’s too late now, but you need to know--you could have asked. Asked for a fireplace or a warming charm or even just another blanket. You could have asked to sleep in any other damned room in the castle, I would not have denied you."
“You would have made me earn it, though.”

He lifted the hand off his eyes. “Well, yes. That is rather the arrangement we’ve agreed on.”

With the blanket still around her shoulders, Belle crawled on her hands and knees to kneel at Rumpelstiltstskin’s feet. “And when I earn a favor from you, there are other things I’d rather have.”

“You want your questions, pretty whore.”

She nodded against his knee. “But I’m sorry to have troubled you.”

He scoffed and reached down to pick her up. He brought the blanket with her, and made certain she was covered before he settled her into his lap. Belle was sitting sideways across him, the sky-blue blanket underneath her. The blanket kept her naked body from touching his clothed one. He wrapped one arm around her shoulder and reached under the blanket to rub her calves with the other hand. “I would have been sorry if something had happened to you.”

Belle shook her head. Her mind was fuzzy and she wasn’t sure if it was left over from the cold or new from how Rumple was treating her. “You just don’t want to fuck a corpse.”

Rumpelstiltskin snorted and squeezed her. “No I don’t,” he agreed. “Especially not a frozen one. Pleasure-toys like you are better when they’re warm.” His hand trailed up her thigh and Belle felt a shiver go through her. “Are you warm, little one?”

Eyes closed, Belle nodded.

Slowly, his hand crossed from her leg to her hip to curls. “Are you warm everywhere?”

She licked her lips. “Hotter in some places than others.”

He made a pleased noise in his throat. “You’re keeping yourself wet for me?”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle sighed dreamily.

“Tell me,” he murmured, “what do you think of, nowadays, when you touch your pretty cunt?”

Belle opened her eyes. It wasn’t the words that shocked her, but the conversational tone he used. How could anyone speak so casually about desires and forbidden fantasies?

“Are you still thinking about your wedding night? The sorts of men you were supposed to marry if you hadn’t made your deal with me?”

She shook her head, rubbing her face into the woven blanket. It was soft and warm, but she would have rather felt his skin. “Not really.”

“Not really?”

“If I think of other men,” Belle said, “I’m usually thinking of how useless they are.”

Rumpelstiltskin snickered at that and held her tighter. “Useless, you say?”

“They try to pleasure me, but they can’t.” She opened her legs a little, inviting him to touch her if he wanted to.

“At least these phantoms want to pleasure you and not bring you to harm.”
“They don’t have the imagination to hurt me. They aren’t creative or clever.”

“What do they do?” His whisper was soft and seductive in her ear. Belle’s toes curled. He wanted her to give up her darkest secrets. How convenient that she wanted to tell him.

“In my mind,” she began, “I can see a line of men stretching out into the distance. They’re waiting to fuck me. They hold their cocks rigid in their hands thinking of what it will be like to bed me. All of them want me, and they take me, one after the other. And I’m just lying on some sort of platform and I’m so bored.”

“Hardly the material for a fantasy,” he remarked. His palm covered the curls between her legs, one finger idly tracing her lower lips.

Closing her eyes again Belle allowed herself a grin. “I like thinking about their frustration. Every one of them wants to be the one to make me come but none of them can. It makes them so angry so they just fuck me harder and it still doesn’t work. Perhaps it’s cruel of me, but they’re so pathetic. They never even think to touch me or play with my body--they think I should go into raptures just for the sake of their stupid cocks.”

“Do you get any pleasure at all, sweet Belle?” Slowly, he opened her gates and dipped a finger into her wetness. His breath hitched. She must have surprised him. Belle arched her back and adjusted her hips to give him more of her body.

“You’re there,” she answered. “You’re watching them all as they fuck me. You’re sitting in judgement over them. Perhaps it’s a punishment for me, to be teased and tormented with an unquenchable thirst. Perhaps it’s a test for them. Perhaps all these ordinary men are looking for the chosen one among them who can match you in pleasing a woman. Perhaps you sent out a call for anyone else in the world who can satisfy me the way you do.”

“Fuck,” he hissed. He rubbed her wetness over her folds and around her pleasure spot, dipping into her core whenever he needed to refresh his fingers. “What next, my slut?”

“They come inside me, every one of them. Everything below my waist is awash in their useless white semen. Every one of them is mixed in with all the others, nothing to distinguish one man’s leavings from another’s. Every man in that crowd spent himself on me and none of them deserved me.”

Rumpelstiltskin pushed his fingers into her cunt and she clenched around them. “And then?”

“And then you come down from your place on high. You--you fuck me, just like they did, but so much better. Because it’s you. I know that you can pleasure me with your hands and your mouth and your magic, but right now you don’t need all that. All you need is your cock.”

“Yes?” He rubbed her pleasure spot over and over and Belle felt the sensation rising up out of her.

“You fuck me in the simplest way possible. You fuck me like a husband fucks a wife, facing me, lying with me. The games, the pain, the deal--we don’t need any of those things. It is enough to be with you, to be one with you, to come --” Belle howled out her pleasure, tightening her body as she shook around his fingers. She throbbed and whined and he held her against his chest as she trembled.

He gave her a moment, and then he spoke again. “Do I come, in your fantasy?”

Belle nodded against his leather waistcoat. “Your seed,” she whispered, “is black. When you come, it stands out against all the others. All those stupid, useless men. You’re the one who satisfied me,
Rumpelstiltskin. You’re the one I ought to be with. No one else.”

Holding her close, he kissed her forehead. “No one else could pay what I paid to buy you, my lovely whore. Let alone pay the price of keeping you.”

Belle blinked. “What price is that?” she asked. “Am I still costing you?”

He brought his hand to her lips and Belle smelled her pungent pleasure. Without a thought, she opened her mouth and licked her wetness off his fingers.

“You’re worth it,” he murmured. “You are worth the price I pay for you.”

But what price was it? She would ask, the next time he allowed her a question.

Rumpelstiltskin cleared his throat. “I imagine you’re quite warm now.”

Belle nodded. Her pleasure plused loudly in her ears, her secret places throbbing with every heartbeat.

“Are you hungry, my sweet?”

“Yes.” Her voice was small.

“Do you want anything in particular?”

Belle shook her head. “Whatever I deserve.”

He laughed. “My whore deserves a sausage so thick she can’t fit her mouth around it! But I think I’ll give you something to eat first.”

He kept her in his lap to feed her. He kept her wrapped in the blanket with one arm around her shoulders. Belle never saw the breakfast tray, or any other plate or bowl. He conjured food bite by bite and fed her from his hand—the same hand he had just used to make her come. He gave her pieces of fruit and morsels of meat, miniature pastries, both sweet and savory. Belle tasted her pleasure with every bite. She ate until her belly was heavy with good things.

“Thank you,” she whispered. At last she felt bright-eyed and clear-headed. She was ready to serve him however he wanted.

He kissed her head. “It’s nothing, little thing. Tending to your physical well-being is the very least I can do.” He nudged her out of his lap and stood up. “Unfortunate that I don’t seem to manage it very well. But no matter. Get on your knees and follow me.”

The change in his tone was so abrupt that Belle had no opportunity to respond. The cuffs pulled her to the ground, with the blanket draped over her back as though she were a horse in winter.

Rumple’s words had been contemptuous. He was angry at himself over this mishap, blamed himself for letting her almost freeze. Belle wanted to comfort him, to reassure him that he was doing a fine job of caring for her. He had been right, after all: She could have asked to be moved to a different cell, even just one without open windows. If he had refused her, then it might have been his fault. But she ought to have at least brought her condition to his attention.

Of course, he could have asked her. Either of them could have said something and neither did. And Rumpelstiltskin was the only one of them who had any power over Belle’s circumstances. So perhaps he had treated her shoddily, even if she was too fond of him to be angry about it.
Belle had time to think on these things while she crawled on her hands and knees behind Rumpelstiltskin. What did he have planned? Where was he taking her? This carpeted stretch of corridor might have been somewhere she’d explored before, but Belle wouldn’t have sworn to it. The castle halls looked different from this vantage point. It was hard to get her bearings.

He stopped in front of a door. The door opened, but Rumpelstiltskin stood just outside it. Belle sat up on her heels to look at him.

“Under the bed in this room, there is a chamber pot. Use it and then call me when you’re done.”

“Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.” Belle obeyed, even when she didn’t understand. She crawled into the room and Rumple shut the door behind her.

By the standards of the castle it was a medium-sized room, nearly twice the size of the largest bedchamber back home. There was a fire in the grate but no candles lit. Gray winter daylight snuck through the closed curtains. The wall hangings and bed curtains were all a soft, rosy pink, almost the color of cooked meat. It was a sweet room, and it made Belle feel pleasantly warm inside.

The chamber pot was on the far side of the bed, away from the closed door. Belle took the blanket off her shoulders and set it on a nearby chair. She used the pot just as she used her bucket in the cell. Magic always emptied that bucket, hopefully the chamber pot would be under the same enchantment.

Uncovered now, Belle crawled back around the bed so she faced the door. “I’m done, Rumpelstiltskin,” she called. It was kind of him to give her this privacy. Thoughtful of him to consider her body’s less attractive functions.

He came into the room, his footsteps slow and deliberate, like the movements of a somber dance. His hands were pressed together in front of him, fingers spread. When he spoke, his voice was serious, measured. “Get in the bed,” he ordered.

The cuffs pulled Belle to climb on top of the coverlet before turning the bed down to get inside. She had to fight against her own weight to pull the blankets away from the mattress and put her body between the sheets. Distracted by this battle, it took Belle a moment to register the novelty of his order: He wanted her in a bed.

She hadn’t slept in a bed since she’d fallen ill. The narrow bed in that pus-green room had been too small for anything pleasant to happen there—and what had happened there hadn’t been pleasant at all. Here, in this room the color of rose petals, the bed was wide enough to accommodate whatever activities he might have in mind.

He was watching her, looking at her. The shadows fell strangely on his face so she couldn’t read his expression. What would he ask her to do next?

Uncertain, but unafraid, Belle pulled down the rest of the coverlet on what she was already thinking of as his side of the bed. She opened the it up to him, the white linen sheets a bright spot in the middle of the gloom.

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“Will you join me?” she asked.

Rumpelstiltskin stepped forward. The shadows changed around him and now Belle could see his grin. “It’s a little early to retire for the evening,” he quipped. “Some of us have work to do.”

“Oh?” Belle brightened. “What work is that?” It wasn’t a spinning day, or else he would have woken her before dawn.
“Arrangements for a journey. I thought I might take you out for an afternoon sometime.”

“Wait, really?” Belle bolted up in the bed. “A journey? Out of the castle? Where are we going?” She scrambled to the edge of the bed to meet him where he stood.

“You’re not going anywhere today, my girl.” He held her by the arms to keep her in place. “In fact, you’re not even leaving this bed.” His hands went down her arms and rested on her cuffs. “Stay here,” he ordered gently. “Keep the bed warm until I come for you.”

The cuffs grew warm at his words. A little nervous, Belle nibbled at her lower lip. “How long will you be gone?”

Rumpelstiltskin placed a kiss on her temple. She felt him breathing in the scent of her hair. “How long do you think I can stay away from a creature such as you?” Before he stepped away he handed her something heavy. “In case you require entertainment.”

Belle looked down and saw the copper-colored book, the story that never ended. How perfect! “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Rest, my dear,” he ordered as he walked out the door. “And keep warm!”

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It was a comfortable bed, with a mattress stuffed with goose feathers. Belle propped herself up with embroidered pillows and covered herself to her chin with blankets. There were many blankets underneath the coverlet. At the foot of the bed there was a fur that was rosy pink and softer than any animal Belle had ever felt. What manner of creature had it been?

She put the fur around her head and shoulders while she read. Though the fire burned cheerily, the room was still had a chill. Perhaps the coal Belle had swallowed had gone out and left her with no warmth in her belly. Perhaps being without Rumpelstiltskin had left her victim to a particular coldness. Either way, Belle was grateful for the fur, and for every blanket that kept her warm.

 Appropriately, the next part of the story that never ended told her of a desert. She read of a desert made of colors--all the sand and dust formed into dunes that were each their own color, thousands of brilliant hues stretching out into the horizon. Belle had never seen sand, though she had read about it in books before this one.

The boy in her story was walking through the multi-colored desert. Sweat poured off him until he felt that his body dry out and blow away. But then he came upon a lion who lived in the desert and was the desert. The creature blazed with fire and his colors changed every time he stepped on a different sand dune. Though the lion introduced himself as the Many-Colored Death, the boy made friends with him and was able to ride on his back as they travelled to the lion’s palace.

The daylight faded and the candles magically lit and Belle stayed in that massive bed. She kept herself warm, just as Rumpelstiltskin had ordered, and she read the fantastical story he had given her.

Slowly, gradually, Belle found herself drooping over her book. She would wake herself up with a jolt and then go back to her reading--until her eyes felt heavy again. She fought the urge to sleep, until she noticed the candles going out, one by one. The fire burned just as steadily as it had been, but the candles were guttering all around her, leaving her in a comfortable darkness. She decided to
take the hint.

Leaning over one side of the bed, but careful not to actually leave it, Belle reached out to place her book on a nearby table. She arranged the pillows behind her and the blankets on top of her so she was lying down while remaining comfortable and warm.

It was wonderful to breathe easily as she prepared to sleep. She didn’t have to brace herself against the unending cold, didn’t have to hold her body in one position to retain warmth. She was comfortable. For the first time in weeks she was able to actually rest instead of just succumbing to exhaustion. Finally, Belle was able to have deep and uninterrupted sleep.

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“Wake up, my Belle.”

The voice in her ear was soft and peaceful. The weight on her body was warm. Belle opened her eyes easily.

“Rumple?” she smiled as she came out of her sleep. He was lying on top of her. The fire burned low and the outline of his body was just another shadow in the darkness. But she knew it was him. He had said he would come for her.

“Did you pleasure yourself, my sweet?”

Yawning, Belle nodded. “Of course, Rumple.”

“Good.” He lay in bed with her under the blankets, face to face. Dimly, Belle could see that he had one hand braced against the headboard. It bore most of his weight. His other hand caressed her face. Slowly, lingeringly, he trailed that hand down her body, stopping only once he was between her legs.

He touched her wetness and Belle sighed.

He chuckled. “Oh yes, you were good for me, weren’t you, my slut? You are always a perfect whore.”

“Yours,” Belle said. Desire made her voice high and weak. “I’m your whore, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Yes.” With his hips, he pushed her legs further apart. He slid his manhood inside her with a noise of contentment. “Yes, you are my thing.”

Belle rocked her hips against him, relished the way his body answered her movement. “Make me yours, Rumple.”

He pushed inside her, steady and rhythmic. Not thrusting with a desperate passion, but slowly, patiently. They were joined together and they had all the time in the world. Belle wanted this to last forever.

Her hands were free. The cuffs hadn’t bound her to anything. At first, she lay her arms flat against the mattress on either side of her body. But as Rumpelstiltskin worked in her, it became harder and harder to keep herself still.
With a jerk, he pulled her up to him and her arms instinctively wrapped around his neck. She clung to him and that’s when she noticed: He wasn’t wearing a waistcoat. She could touch his neck, he wasn’t protected by one of his high leather collars.

Belle flattened her hands against his shoulder blades as he pushed in and out of her. He wore a shirt, but the feel of it was different. It wasn’t silk, the texture was more coarse.

His breath was hot in her ear. He was panting, going faster now in pursuit of his pleasure. Belle had a pursuit of her own. Slowly, perhaps so slowly he wouldn’t notice, Belle moved her hands down Rumpelstiltskin’s body.

The shirt he wore was loose and flowing. It hung down off his chest and bunched up around his waist, just above the place where their bodies met. She could feel the heat of him through the fabric. Linen. He must be wearing linen. He must be wearing a nightshirt.

What else was he wearing?

Fear and desire mingled in Belle’s heart. She wanted to keep touching him. What would it cost her to do that? Would he make her pay for that intimacy as he made her pay for secrets? What if he wanted her to touch him? Perhaps he did. Why else would he have come to her in a nightshirt? He could have worn anything else. Well, if this wasn’t what he wanted, he would surely let her know.

Even as Rumpelstiltskin picked up his pace, Belle forced herself to slow down. She wanted to be cautious. Their bodies were entwined together but her hands had to act like they had a will of their own. Belle rested one hand on her bent knee, close to his body. She pressed the metal of her cuff against her own soft flesh, anchoring her wrist to one spot. She took a breath and tentatively reached out to brush her fingers against Rumpelstiltskin’s thigh.

He froze.

Mid-thrust, he stopped moving. Neither of them spoke and neither of them moved. They didn’t even breathe. Belle felt the texture of his skin on her fingertips, warm and smooth and wonderful.

The silence between them was so profound that Belle could hear her heart pounding. Or perhaps that was his heart, racing frantically, beating against his ribs like an animal in a cage.

Belle licked her lips. This was a mistake. He didn’t want her to touch him. She had overstepped her boundaries. She had taken more than he had wanted to give.

She took her hand away and he began to breathe again. He didn’t speak, but he slowly began to rock himself against her body again. He went on as though nothing had happened.

But Belle couldn’t pretend. “Do--” she stammered. “Do you want to bind my hands?” If he kept her free she might be tempted to touch him again. If he locked the cuffs against the headboard they would both be safe.

Rumpelstiltskin fucked her in silence for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was strangely normal. “No,” he said. “I know what I want.”

He took her hands and pulled them up to the pillow so they rested on either side of her head. Then, he laced his fingers through hers and braced himself against her. Belle laid back. She had his cock in her cunt and his hands in her hands and the two of them were so close they breathed the same air. It was perfect.

Pleasure rose up out of her and she moaned. Rumpelstiltskin answered her with a soft growl. Their
bodies were joined together and they moved together in a wave that emanated from their hips down to their feet and up to their hands.

Their hands clutched each other. Belle dug her fingernails into Rumple’s skin and he grasped her so tightly she thought her bones might break. He thrust into her again and again and he was so close to her and she was so full of him and she only wanted more, more!

Belle burst with a cry around Rumpelstiltskin’s cock. He came quickly after that, spilling his black seed inside her. He collapsed onto her body, panting for air. Belle felt the sweat drip from his brow to her bosom. Their hands stayed laced together.

Eventually, he rolled off of her, onto the space on the bed that had been left empty for him. He took several deep breaths before he spoke. “I’d forgotten how comfortable beds are. Especially for fucking.”

“I never expected to be comfortable in a position like this.” It had been a nightmare, once, to have a body on top of hers in the dark. Now it was the sweetest dream.

His hand sought hers in the space between them. “And you’re warm enough? You need to tell me if you’re cold,”

Belle yawned and nodded. “This room is lovely,” she said. “Very warm, very comfortable.” She pulled the blanket over her shoulder, remembering that she had been asleep before all of this.

Rumpelstiltskin seemed to remember as well. He let go of her hand. She felt his weight leave the mattress, heard his feet hit the floor.

“Do you want me to go?” Belle asked drowsily.

“Back to the cell? Never.” His voice traveled around to her side of the bed. “You’ll stay here tonight.”

“Only tonight?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll go back to the cell tomorrow?”

“No.” He put his hand in her hair and kissed the top of her head. “There are nearly a thousand bedrooms in this castle. And I’ve decided I’m going to fuck you in every single one.”

“Oh,” Belle let out a shivering moan at the thought of Rumple fucking her a thousand different times in a thousand different places.

With a gentle squeeze, Rumpelstiltskin bade her sleep well.

“Wait,” Belle stopped him before he walked out the door. She could see the outline of him framed against the light from the hallway. She could see the shape of his high collar and the gleam of his boots. “Where do you sleep? Which bedroom is your bedroom?”

He cocked his head at her. “It’s my castle, silly girl. Every bedroom is my bedroom!”
The Sea

Chapter Summary

Field trip and story time!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Belle woke up in the bed in the rose-pink room, daylight was making a valiant effort to break through the gaps in the closed curtains. Sunshine snuck along the floor below the draperies, reflecting on the polished cherrywood. Belle could see the outlined rectangles of the windows along the walls.

It was such a lovely room, Belle thought as she rolled over. And such a lovely bed! She sighed and stretched out on the mattress. In the center of the bed, her arms and legs couldn’t reach any of the edges, it was just softness and warmth for as far as she could stretch. And she had it all to herself! If she had a bed this fine at home she would have been expected to share it with her companions—or at least with her husband. Belle would not have minded sharing this bed with Rumpelstiltskin, but he didn’t seem interested in spending the night with her.

It surprised Belle to find that she wanted him to stay with her. At least she wanted to know what it would be like. How would it feel to fall asleep in Rumpelstiltskin’s arms? To wake up with him in the morning? She was increasingly certain that he didn’t sleep, so there was no way to find out if he would be a heavy sleeper or a light one. But what would it be like to have him near her all night? To wrap herself around his body, to hold him and have him hold her? Such thoughts filled Belle with a fluttering delight, an anticipation that made her tremble.

Eyes closed she rubbed her face and then let her hands slide down her naked body. She imagined they were Rumple’s hands, that he was touching her, gentle but firm, claiming her with this familiarity. Belle swallowed. And perhaps if he touched her thus, he would not object to her touching him in the same way.

That thought was like a splash of cold water on her face. Belled open her eyes and sat up, putting her hands to her sides. It wouldn’t happen. Rumpelstiltskin wasn’t interested in letting her touch his body. She had tried only last night and it had done nothing for him. He hadn’t said anything but it was clear: He didn’t like it when she touched him. And that made sense, he had never demanded it of her. It was a rare event for her to even use her hands to pleasure his cock. He wasn’t going to give her anything more than that.

With a resigned sigh, Belle pulled away the pink blankets and got out of bed. She should find Rumpelstiltskin and see what he wanted from her today. Or at least go back to the cell and get her robe. Even if she wasn’t going to sleep in the cold anymore, she would still like to be dressed during the day.

When Belle opened the door, Rumple was already on the other side, apparently just about to come in himself.

“Oh!” they both said when they saw each other.
It was odd for Belle to see him surprised, or at least to be at his eye level when he was. For a moment, it felt like she had never seen him before. His face seemed so natural, so honest, in that moment when he reacted to her presence. He looked disarmed.

Instead of engaging in an awkward moment where neither knew where the other was going, Belle backed down at once. She went back into the pink room and got to her knees. There was a carpet by the fireplace, like the one in the dining room, but in the design of a blossoming rose. Belle knelt in the center of it.

“Good girl,” Rumpelstiltskin murmured as he approached her. “And good morning. How did you sleep?”

Belle nodded. “Quite well, Rumpelstiltskin. There was a brief interruption, but it was a pleasant one.”

He grinned. “I’m glad to hear that. Have some breakfast, my dear.”

The tray was on the ground in front of her, sausage links and fried potatoes, as well as a goblet of sweet red wine.

“Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin.” She crawled to him and kissed his boots before she ate. The cuffs didn’t bind her to the ground, but she stayed on her knees anyway. “This is heartier fare than usual.”

“You’ll need your energy today, my sweet. We’re going on an adventure.”

Belle swallowed a bit of potato before she’d had time to chew it properly. She coughed and lapped up a bit of wine to recover herself. “Yes, you said something about that yesterday. About going on a journey?”

“Have you ever been to the seaside, my pet?”

Her eyes widened. “No!” she answered. “No, the closest I ever got was one time when my parents took me to meet with a suitor who was the lord of a river port.”

“Really?” There was a glint in Rumpelstiltskin’s eye. “How loathsome was that one?”

“He was actually very sweet,” Belle said. “Through all of his daughters were older than I was at the time.”

Rumple chuckled. “There is something I must ask of you, dear Belle. Something we must make sure you’re willing to do before I expect you to do it.”

Belle swallowed down a mouthful of sausage. “What’s that?”

“Are you willing to give pleasure to someone who isn’t me? And receive pleasure from that person as well?”

Belle blinked. Take pleasure from someone who wasn’t Rumple? “Do you want me to?”

“It’s your will that I’m interested in, my girl. Your pleasure, and your ease.”

Belle took a deep breath. “But this is a specific case, here and now? The question isn’t, is this something I would want in general, but rather, is this something I want to do this morning? Is that right?”

“You don’t even have to think of it as something you \textit{want},” he said. “I know what a flighty bird
desire can be. But is it something you’re opposed to?”

Belle sat back on her heels, thinking over this proposition. “Who is this person who would pleasure me?” she asked. “What man would you want me to fuck in front of you, Rumple?”

“No, sweet Belle. Nothing like a man.”

Her eyes fluttered, blinking. “A woman?”

He bent down and kissed her gently. “You’re half-right.” He held her face. “And I would be with you,” he assured her. “Nothing would happen that you did not like. Are you opposed to the idea?”

“No,” Belle said honestly. “I trust you, Rumple. I will do whatever you order me to do.”

He kissed her again, taking her hands in his and pulling her up to stand without breaking the kiss.

“Good girl,” he said when he broke away. “You’re going to enjoy this.”

Pleasantly dizzy from such a thorough kiss, Belle nodded.

Rumpelstiltskin offered her his arm. “Shall we go?”

Belle looked to the open door. “I was going to get my robe.”

“Oh you won’t need that, not where we’re going.” He looked her over. “But perhaps you do need something.”

With a lazy, fluid grace, Rumpelstiltskin waved his hand over Belle’s body. As she watched, a cloud of tiny white bubbles floated around her and lightly descended onto her body. Where ordinary soap bubbles would have popped, the magic that Rumple made remained on her skin, spreading out into the shape of a simple dress. Belle raised up her arm and watched the sleeve of bubbles separate from her skin and move with her motions, like gauzy fabric. Looking down, Belle saw the pink of her legs through the translucent white skirt of this magic-made dress. She could even make out the shape of her breasts and see the darker pink of her nipples through the bodice.

“It’s not exactly modest, is it?”

“You’re a whore, my sweet. Never forget that.”

Belle smiled in spite of herself. “Yes, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He looked her up and down approvingly. “It suits you. And the other party is sure to agree. And, most importantly, this dress will protect you from the sun. The seaside is a bright place, quite disagreeable. But there’s nowhere else to meet her, so--” he took her hand “--we must be off!”

The wine-colored smoke enveloped them. Belle closed her eyes and waited for the moment when she felt the ground beneath her feet again.

She did feel the ground, and then she felt it sink, just a little. With her eyes still shut, she wiggled her toes on the hot, loose, sinking ground. She could hear a noise in the distance, a steady, rhythmic sound, like the babble of a brook but magnified a thousand times. When she inhaled, she smelled salt in the air, and fish, and something mineraly and windswept. She took a moment to smell and to hear and to feel with her feet before she let go of Rumpelstiltskin. With her eyes still closed, Belle bent down to touch the rough, small grains at her feet.

“Sand,” she said and she opened her eyes. She rubbed a pinch of it between her fingers. It felt like
grains of salt or sugar, a coarse almost-powder. She picked up a handful and watched in amazement as it ran through her fingers like water. Belle laughed.

“I’ve read about sand,” she told Rumple. “The story you gave me has that desert of many colors. And so many stories are told about the seaside. I’ve read books about sailing and people who make their whole livelihood from the ocean. But I’ve never seen it before.”

She looked around at that sand dunes with what she knew was called dune grass growing on top of them. She looked at the wide blue expanse of sky and the small white birds that cawed as they flew. Belle felt tears in her eyes. Those birds were the first living creature she’d seen in almost three months.

She covered her mouth, awed by the newness and the vastness and the glory of everything she was seeing.

“I never thought...” she whispered. “I could never have imagined…”

There was no answer. Rumpelstiltskin only looked at her with a furrowed brow. He seemed puzzled, perhaps concerned. He had no attention for the beauty around them. He only looked at her.

Rumpelstiltskin struck Belle now as incongruous. He was wearing his spiky scaled coat over black breeches and his shiny black boots, with a dark-printed cravat covering his neck. Contrasted with the bright sun and the blue sky and the soft green of the dune grass and the pale sand, he looked--odd. He was a creature of night--the Dark One--and out here in the sunlight he looked like a miserably overdressed member of a holiday party.

On the other hand, Belle felt right at home in her bubbly white dress. It was warm here under the sun. Though the wind that whipped around them was insistent, it didn’t make her cold. She felt lighthearted and light-colored. She felt happy.

“You haven’t even seen the best part,” he said, offering her his arm as he started walking down a sandy path.

“I know,” she babbled. “I know I can hear the ocean and the waves crashing on the beach but I haven’t seen it all yet and I really can’t wait to--Oh.”

It was blue. That was her first thought. Darker than the sky. Wine-dark, like the old poets said, but blue.

Without meaning to, Belle was focusing on her breathing. It was the same feeling as when Rumpelstiltskin entered her too quickly, the same shocking pleasure, the same feeling of too muchness that took her breath away. Then as now, her response was to focus on one aspect of what was happening at a time.

The ocean was blue. She breathed.

The sky was blue. She breathed.

The ocean and the sky met each other at a line. She breathed.

The line, the horizon, stretched out in every direction. She breathed.

The horizon stretched out as far as Belle could see. She breathed.

“Where does it end?” she whispered.
“The edge of the world, my sweet,” Rumpelstiltskin answered. “But a ship must sail for forty days and forty nights in one direction to get there, and even then there isn’t much to see.”

She turned to him. “Have you been there?”

“I’ve been everywhere at least twice. Are you ready to go on?”

Belle swallowed, and nodded. He took her to a little cove, a secluded patch of sand surrounded on three sides by craggy rocks and on the fourth side by the sea itself. It would have been impossible to get to, had Rumpelstiltskin not picked Belle up and jumped off a cliff, floating slowly as they descended to land safely on their feet.

“And will we get back up the same way?”

“When our business is done, I’ll take us home.”

“Yes,” Belle said, her mind clearer now that she was out of sight of the endless horizon. But even here, there was so much to look at! “What is our business, anyway?”

“Returning stolen property.”

Belle turned away from the tide pool she had been observing. “Did you steal it in the first place?”

Rumpelstiltskin raised his chin in a position of defensive innocence. “I never steal and I never give. One way or another, the scales always balance.”

“Mm-hmm,” Belle looked up at the blue sky, sparing a thought for everything he had given to her. “But this doesn’t sound like something that will involve me getting pleasured.”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. “Perhaps the victim will want to reward you for your help in returning what’s theirs.”

“What is theirs?”

“This.” With a wave of his hand, Rumpelstiltskin produced a floating ball of yellow light. For a moment, it hovered over his palm, but then began to drift up into the air. Snatching it up, Rumple gripped the ball tightly in his claws.

Somewhere in the distance, Belle thought she heard a sound. Faint and high-pitched and musical. It was a cry for help. She looked around for the source of the noise, but all she saw was Rumpel holding the glowing ball.

“Do you hear that?” she asked him. “Someone needs help.”

His smile was gentle, but knowing. “That’s what we’re going to do, brave Belle. We’re going to help her.”

“Her?” Belle said softly. She was still trying to hear the cry. It had to be coming from the ocean, but somehow it seemed louder the closer she got to Rumpelstiltskin. “Who are we going to help, Rumple? What is that thing in your hand?”

With his free hand, he took her wrist. “Don’t let go,” he ordered as he transferred the ball of light from his hand into hers.

The sound was even louder now, a song that Belle felt in her bones more than she heard it with her ears. She felt it most in the hand that held the ball. The thing buzzed against her fingers, the light of it
shining through her skin. Her hands gripped it, but it didn’t feel solid. It was like she was holding a swarm of musical bees in her hand. She wanted to let go of it, but the cuffs wouldn’t allow her.

“This,” Rumpelstiltskin explained at last, “is the voice of a mermaid.”

Her eyes widened. “A mermaid!”

He nodded. He seemed pleased to have impressed her. “Did you think they weren’t real?”

“No, of course, they’re real. But—” Belle looked at the singing, glowing object in her hands. “This is her voice?”

Again, Rumple nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

“And,” Belle gasped. “And when I give it back to her—I’ll—she’ll—!”

“If you want her to,” he rocked on the balls of his feet. “If that…appeals.”

Overcome with a hundred different emotions, Belle could do little but nod and babble and stare at the voice. “We used to tell stories of mermaids. Of how beautiful they were, how powerful and how marvelous. We used to swim in the moat around the castle. My friends and I would braid reeds into our hair and plan a party for all our fish companions.”

Belle bit her lip, and felt tears on her cheeks. It had been years since she had thought about those games, of being so young and imaginative. All three of them had wanted to be mermaids. Mathilde had wanted to talk to fish. Jeanne had wanted to sing songs of love that would lure sailors to her.

But Belle had wanted to be a mermaid for the freedom they had. In her childish mind, a mermaid could swim through the whole ocean, exploring every sea and every depth unencumbered by any of the duties that had confined Belle even then. A mermaid had strength and power and self-determination. Nothing could hold them, no more than a man could catch the sea itself in a net.

And now she was being offered a chance to help such a creature! And then be pleasured by one! It was almost too much to imagine.

As Belle stared out into the endless ocean, she felt a gentle hand on her back. Rumple. “Are you alright, my dear?”

Belle shook her head to clear her thoughts. “Yes,” she said. Her hands holding the voice, she wiped her eyes with her wrists. She took a breath and nodded. “So this mermaid is without a voice. How do we help her?”

Rumple set his arm across her shoulders and pointed to the water with his other hand. He pressed into her side, his voice low and close. “Walk out into the water, and keep the voice above the surface. Don’t let it fall until the right moment.”

“When is the right moment?”

“If you don’t know, it’s not the right moment! Keep walking until the water comes up to your sweet little cunt. Let the brine meet the brine, and then I’ll need you to sing. Can you sing?”

“When I have to.”

“Your talent doesn’t matter much. The voice will do the work for you. It just needs an outlet.”

“What song should I sing?”
“You’ll know.”

Belle bit her lip and looked up at him. “You’re trusting me with a lot.”

He held her chin. “Yes I am. And I have no reason to think my trust is misplaced.”

“So I go out and I sing. Is that all?”

“No, that will just call her. We’ll have to wait for her to come. If you like, I’ll tell you stories to pass the time.”

“Yes, please.”

He smiled at her. “Go now,” he held his hand out to the sea. “Mind the rocks and shells.”

Holding the glowing orb in both hands in front of her like a sacred object, Belle took her first steps into the water. It was cold on her feet and the sand sank more quickly here than on the shore. The waves were smaller in this cove than they were on the open water, but she could still feel them pushing against her and then pulling her in. She breathed.

She looked down at her feet. The hem of her dress floated on the surface, the white bubbles blending in with the sea foam. The water was clear, with only a few tufts of seaweed obscuring her view of her bare feet. As she walked, she kicked up sand and small stones. There were a few seashells in the water. Belle would have dearly loved to pick one up and examine it, but she was on a mission.

The water was over her knees now and she felt a long way away from Rumpelstiltskin.

A wave rolled over her and almost knocked her over. She felt her hands clutching the orb and realized that the cuffs would not let her fail. They would obey the order not to let go of the voice until the “right moment.”

Two more steps and the water was just below her waist. She could feel the ripples lapping at her lower lips. Was she wet with desire? Or just wet from the sea? True to her instructions, Belle took a moment to let the sea water thoroughly dampen her secret places. Let the brine meet the brine, he had said.

In her hands, the voice buzzed more and more. The noise was louder too. She held it up to her ear to listen to the melody of it. It was the song, she realized, that she would have to sing.

Belle closed her eyes, and opened her mouth.

There were no words, just a melody. Belle used her own voice to sing the song, but she could hear the mermaid’s voice behind her, around her, inside her. She could feel the voice calling out to the mermaid. She felt its hope and its longing to be found. She held the voice to her heart and added all the volume she could to this song, this lonely cry into the vast ocean.

When she could sing no more, when even the mermaid’s voice had become a whisper and the yellow light had dimmed to a gleam, Belle walked back to the beach where Rumpelstiltskin was waiting for her. He stood very still and nodded at her when she came out of the water. The white dress clung to her, transparent on her legs. The spray had splashed her hair and bodice as well. Still holding on to the voice, Belle stood in the sun to dry off and get warm again.

“How are you at climbing rocks, little one?”

“While I’m still holding on to this?” She raised the voice in her hands and shook her head.
“Shall I carry you then?”

“Where are we going?”

He pointed to a nearby outcropping of rocks that stretched out into the sea. “As far out as we can go while still staying on land.” He took her wrist and they were on the rocks in an instant. Rumpelstiltskin sat, his legs dangling off the rock, his boots almost but not quite touching the water.

Unable to kneel at his feet, Belle sat next to him. “So now we wait?”

“Yes.”

“And you tell me a story?”

He gave her a small smile, as though pleased she remembered his offer. “What would you like to hear?”

“Tell me about this mermaid. Please. How did she become separated from her voice?”

“Love.” Rumpelstiltskin looked off into the distance. “It was in the pursuit of love that our little mermaid lost everything.”

“Oh,” Belle’s shoulders slumped. “So this isn’t a story with a happy ending?”

He shook his head. “Not yet, at least. Do you want the story from the beginning?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll tell it to you. And remember, I’m telling you a story, not answering one of your questions. Any resemblance to the truth is entirely coincidental.”

Belle held back her smile and nodded solemnly. “Of course, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Once upon a time,” he began, “there was a mermaid princess who lived in a palace in her father’s kingdom under the sea. Not content with the endless wonders of her own world, the princess developed an obsession with the land-dwellers who traveled her seas. She looked for treasure in shipwrecks, and made daring trips to the surface to spy on ships and sailors. The girl had an appetite for human things that could not be satisfied.”

“I like her already,” Belle said.

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. “It came to pass that the mermaid found a human castle that overlooked the sea. It became her favorite place to watch for people. She liked the funny way they moved on land, holding themselves up on their feet. She was mystified by how they could make fire to light the darkness, and even cast their fire into the sky to shine like stars.”

“What?” Belle interrupted.

“Fireworks. They can’t do that underwater.”

“Oh, yes. That makes sense. Please don’t stop.”

“I’ve barely started. Now, in this castle, there lived a human princess. Our mermaid princess saw this woman and was instantly smitten. She knew, in her heart of hearts, that she must be with this princess, that they were destined to be together and to love each other until their bodies became seafoam on the shore.”
Belle sighed. It had been a long time since she had heard a good romance.

“But--” Rumpelstiltskin went on, “how can a human and a sea creature be together? Where would they make their home? The little princess went to her local sea witch in tears, desperate for any help that could be bought for any price. The witch said that the solution to her problem was simple. They only way to get what she wanted was to become a human herself.”

“Could she do that?”

Rumpelstiltskin gave Belle a sly grin. “They made a deal. In exchange for the mermaid’s angelic voice, the sea witch would make her a human for three days. But! If the sea princess could get the land princess to fall in love with her and kiss her, then she would get her voice back and remain a human for the rest of her life.”

Clearly that hadn’t happened. “What if she failed?”

“If there was no kiss, if true love could not be proved in three days, then the mermaid’s voice would belong to the sea witch—and so would her soul.” Rumpelstiltskin poured all of his darkness into those last words. “The witch had a collection of souls, growing with sea urchins and anglerfish in a garden of despair—so far under the water that the sun’s light would never reach them, and they wasted away in utter blackness.

Belle swallowed. “But she was spared that fate somehow.”

“Yes. Our little mermaid was not without allies, even then. A watchful guardian kept eyes on her with her princess. One night he saw the happy couple take a rowboat to a secluded cove. The two women were about to kiss, but before they could the witch’s servants capsized the rowboat from under the water. The moment was ruined and the princesses never came close to kissing again.”

Belle scooted a little closer to Rumpelstiltskin. “This guardian,” she said, “how did he know that the witch would do a thing like that? And why did he care? Did he want to protect the princesses, in his way?”

He shifted on the rocks, inching away from her subtly. “I’m sure if you found the guardian and asked him, he would tell you that everything he did was in the spirit of a just contract. The sea witch cheated, and that is an affront to anyone who relies on fairness in their dealings.”

“Mmm-hm.” Belle was learning all kinds of things today. “So after three days, the mermaid hadn’t gotten her princess to love her?”

“Unfortunately, such things take more time than that.”

“Being able to talk to each other would probably have helped as well.”

“But, when the sea witch came for the mermaid’s soul, the king of the merfolk was able to stop her.”

“Because of the guardian?”

Rumple nodded. “Sabotaging a good-faith agreement is a serious transgression. Doing it to the daughter of a king is even worse. The sea witch fled the mer-king’s justice, but not before she took the voice with her. You see, that part of the deal had remained intact. The princess had indeed spent three days walking on land and breathing air, no one could deny that. Not even the guardian could help her, much to his irritation. So the mermaid went back to her palace, sadder, wiser, and forever without a voice.”
Belle looked down at the glowing ball in her hands. “But we’re going to give it back to her.”

Rumpelstiltskin brushed her hair away from her face. “Yes, my champion of justice and mercy. I searched many years for that voice, and for a way to give it back to the princess without merely giving it to her. After all, I cannot allow magic to come without a price.”

“But you want to,” Belle said softly. “You would just give it back to her if you could, wouldn’t you?”

He frowned. His eyes stayed determinedly on the horizon. “I know what it is to be desperate, Belle. And I know what it is to have that desperation exploited. What happened to her wasn’t fair, it wasn’t…” he trailed off and shook his head. “It wasn’t an equitable transaction.”

They were silent, until Belle asked, “How did you get the voice, anyway?”

“Traded it for a spell to keep dog hair off of furniture.”

Belle snorted and giggled, and Rumpelstiltskin smiled with her, and the sun shone warmly over them both. Belle felt herself filling up with a lovely, golden glow. There was an energy in her blood that buzzed and shook. She could have sworn she heard music when she looked at Rumpelstiltskin.

“Well look at that,” he said as he began to stand up off the rocks. His eyes were trained on the horizon. “I believe we have a visitor.”

Belle looked down at her hands and realized that the voice was glowing brightly. Oh. That must have been why she had felt so strangely just now, so lightheaded and giddy.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now,” Rumple said, “you go into the water.”

Chapter End Notes

Quick word about canon: I’m not too attached to it. This is an AU, and a lot of characterization and plot things are different in this story, and more than just the nature of Belle and Rumple’s deal.
The Song

Chapter Summary

"To our friend Howard, who gave a mermaid her voice and a beast his soul, we will be forever grateful."

Chapter Notes

A belated MerMay chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“She’s coming,” Rumpelstiltskin nodded out to the ocean. “Did you see the tail?”

As a girl, Belle had read the entry on merfolk in The Encyclopaedia of Magickal Creatures so often that she had it memorized. She knew what signs to look for to identify a mermaid. Sitting on a rocky ledge that jutted out to the open water, Belle squinted to search for a tail the bright green of a spring leaf.

There was a splash in the water and she saw fins--two feet wide and fanned out like the wings of a bird in flight. In her hand, the princess’ voice shrieked and buzzed, the yellow glow brightening more every moment.

Belle had seen wonders in her time with Rumpelstiltskin, but this now was the most magical event she had ever been a part of. “Is that really her? The mermaid princess?”

“That’s our fish,” Rumple said. “Now, I need you to get into the water, but keep close to the rock here.”

Nodding, Belle took a deep breath and jumped feet-first into the ocean. She meant to swim back to the ledge, but as soon as the voice hit the water, a yellow wave of song burst into Belle’s head and took away every other thought. Underwater, she gasped and all her air came out as bubbles in the blue-green sea.

The bubbles rose up but Belle sank down. She was too weak to fight against the song, too weak to swim up to the surface with one hand. Drowning was almost peaceful, she found. It was a quiet end. Under the sea, there was no noise, nothing expect the beauty of the voice.

But just as she felt herself succumbing to the depths, Belle realized that she was also being pulled up. Even as her vision dimmed, it was also lightening. She was getting closer to the surface, to the light of the sun. The cuffs pulled her up to safety and locked her to the rock wall, both hands stretched over her head.

Coughing up seawater, Belle gasped for breath and looked around. She was out of the water, her chest bobbing on the surface. The dress Rumple had made for her floated on the water, the bubbles spreading out like seafoam. She looked up at her arms, still clothed in gauzy white. The cuffs held
her up and made her clutch the voice in her hand. Her fingers brushed against the undersides of Rumpelstiltskin’s boots.

“Now stay there,” he ordered sternly. “Don’t let yourself drown, Belle. I should have told you that before I let you go off.”

Belle took a moment to get her breath back before she spoke. “I would have stayed by the rocks if I could have. But the voice--”

“Yes, it has that effect on people, especially when it’s in the water, and when the mermaid herself is so close. A siren’s song has the power to make sailors dash their ships on rocks to get to it. Don’t let the voice get below the water again, Belle. Not before the right moment, not before you get your payment.”

“Payment?” Belle swallowed to get the salty taste out of her mouth. “Why is the mermaid going to pay me and not you?”

Rumpelstiltskin snorted. “Didn’t you listen to the story? The princess is only interested in women.”

“But--” Belle began. But she was interrupted by a red head emerging from the water. Belle gasped. It was her. The mermaid. Right in front of her!

The mermaid’s hair wasn’t red the way the blacksmith back home had a beard the same orange of his forge fires. No, the mermaid’s hair was bright red like a poppy flower or a ripe strawberry—entirely natural, but nothing like a human.

Her eyes were the same way—wider and rounder than any human eyes Belle had ever seen. And they were blue. Belle couldn’t stop herself from thinking they were the color of the ocean, even though they were clearly brighter and bluer than the dark waters all around them. They should have been happy eyes, Belle could feel it, they should have been filled with laughter and love. But instead the mermaid looked wary, fearful and hungry.

She had round cheeks that should have been cheery. Belle knew the princess should have been smiling and laughing and singing. But instead her pink lips were pressed into a grim, tight line.

“It’s alright,” Belle said to her. The creature fixed her eyes on Belle’s lips as they moved. “You’re going to be better when this is over, I promise. What’s your name?”

It had only just occurred to her to wonder if merfolk had names. The Encyclopaedia hadn’t mentioned it.

“Ariel,” Rumpelstiltskin answered above their heads. “Her name is Ariel.”

The sea princess looked up at Rumpelstiltskin and her expression flashed from wary to fierce. She snarled and lunged out of the water. Her body pressed against Belle as she gripped the rocks. The skin of her torso was rubbery and cold, and Belle saw the transition around her waist where pink skin became bright green scales.

Above Belle’s head, Ariel had found a handhold in the rock. With one hand, she was holding herself up out of the water, and with the other she was trying to pry Belle’s fingers away from the voice.

“I can’t let it go,” Belle called up to her. She felt a twinge of grief that she couldn’t simply give the princess what was rightfully hers, but apparently this was deal they had made. And no one broke a deal with the Dark One. “He says you have to pay me first.”
The mermaid huffed and glared at Rumpelstiltskin. Belle could imagine him smirking back at Ariel.

With a wordless grunt, Ariel pushed herself away from the rocks and slid back into the water with a tiny splash. She came up from the water in front of Belle, her shoulders rising above the surface. They were face to face.

There were no scales on Ariel’s face, nor on her arms or chest. Her breasts were bare and floated on the water like Belle’s. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but the parts of a breast that were brown on Belle were shades of purple on Ariel.

When the princess looked at Belle, she lost the rage that had filled her. Her eyes became sad again, her jawline softened. Her lips parted.

“Have you ever kissed a girl before?” Belle asked. She knew Ariel hadn’t gotten the chance with her princess, but had there been any others? Any mermaids?

The shrug Ariel gave was no answer, but the kiss she gave Belle was expert, gentle and soft. She tasted like seawater, but her mouth was invitingly warm.

It was strange to be kissed by a mouth that was the size of her own, to know that either one of them could take control of the kiss. Boldly, Belle opened her mouth wider and slipped her tongue into Ariel. When they broke apart, the mermaid smiled and peppered small kisses around Belle’s face.

That poor human princess, Belle thought. She would never know how lovely it was to be kissed by a mermaid. What had happened to the other woman in the story? Had she been married off? Would she ever be kissed by a woman who loved her?

Ariel went down to Belle’s throat. She kissed her neck and shoulders and Belle moaned softly. The mermaid put her mouth underwater to kiss Belle’s breasts. She was able to keep her eyes above the surface and watch Belle’s face. Ariel licked her nipples, the way Rumpelstiltskin did, and Belle’s body jerked with desire. Ariel wrapped her arms around Belle’s waist and began to suck her in earnest. Belle cried and jerked, her legs kicking in the water. Was it possible to orgasm from only this, without anything touching her pleasure spot at all?

Before she could find out, the mermaid was climbing her again. She held onto the rock and positioned her body so that her breasts were directly in front of Belle’s face. She wanted the favor returned.

Belle wished she had her hands free so that she could touch the mermaid, feel her skin, hold her breasts in her palms the way Rumple did to her. As it was, she followed Ariel’s example. She stuck out her tongue and licked the mermaid’s skin.

It was as cold and salty as the sea itself. Smooth, though, almost slippery, with firm muscles underneath. How much muscle must it take to swim everywhere? Ariel had so much strength in her, but she had suffered so much. Belle wanted to give her something. She would make her feel good.

Purple nipples had not been a trick of the light and the water. They were puckered out from the cold. Or was it from desire? It seemed impossible that a creature of such power and beauty could feel desire for Belle—or at least, because of Belle. Ariel was a goddess, the child of a sea-king, and all Belle could do was worship her.

She sucked and licked, moving from one breast to another as each was offered to her. As this went on, Belle felt Ariel moving to her rhythm. The mermaid pushed Belle’s body onto the rock wall and ground her tail against Belle’s torso. Belle moved with the mermaid as much as she could. She kept
the pebbly nipples in her mouth no matter what.

Faster and faster, Ariel thrust against Belle, and with every thrust the waves splashed higher and harder against the rocks. Once Belle let go of the nipple to take a breath but took in a mouthful of seawater. She coughed and choked, but the mermaid was too caught up in her pleasure to notice, so Belle went right back to her work. The waves broke against them, again and again, unnaturally furious and frequent. Suddenly the mermaid jerked and spasmed and a great wall of water swallowed the whole world.

When the water receded, Ariel was gone. Belle was still bound to the rock, still had the voice in her hand. She coughed up more salty water and weakly called to Rumpelstiltskin.

“I’m here, brave Belle. You were so good.”

“Where’s Ariel?”

“She’s coming back.”

And so she was. The mermaid floated toward them lazily on her back, with her tail stretched out on the surface. Her eyes were closed and she wore a peaceful smile on her face. Belle knew that contentment. She quaked inside to think that she had caused it in Ariel.

“Hey!” she called out, wiggling to get her attention. “Can you come here? Are you alright?”

The mermaid flipped over and kicked her tail to swim toward them. Her smile broadened as she approached Belle, but turned shy just before she reached out of the water to kiss her again.

Belle tried to drop the voice, but apparently this wasn’t the ‘right moment.’ Her hands stayed clasped, no matter how she willed them to open.

“I don’t know what else we have to do,” she told Ariel.

The mermaid grinned and gave Belle another kiss before diving under the water. It seemed she knew what she had to do, even if Belle didn’t.

“Having fun?” Rumpelstiltskin asked from above her head.

Belle gave a weak chuckle as she caught her breath. “I think so. Are you enjoying watching us?”

“Oh yes. It is an inspiring sight.”

“Really? What are you think-- oh! ”

Something bumped against her below the water. Something hot and probing between her legs. She looked down and saw Ariel, her iridescent tail stretching out behind her pink torso. Her red hair floated lazily up from Belle’s waist. In the cool water, Belle felt the movement of the mermaid’s warm mouth on her secret places.

Oh.

Opening her legs was easy in the water. The mermaid pushed Belle open and pressed her face against her folds. Numbened by the cold, Belle felt teeth against her, but there was no pain. Ariel’s tongue was rough and invasive and perfect. Belle moaned to feel her against her soft skin.

The mermaid teased her and explored her until Belle was worn out just from that. She wasn’t prepared for the tides to turn again. Against the rock, her body moved with the waves, ebbing and
flowing in that sweet, familiar rhythm. Up and down she bobbed. In and out Ariel crashed against her pleasure spot. Slowly at first, but then faster. And then faster still.

Belle wasn’t sure when it started, but she was jerking madly. Her legs were wrapped around the mermaid’s head and Ariel didn’t need to breathe so her mouth never stopped. The waves crashed and Belle screamed and her hands opened and the voice dropped into the water.

When she opened her eyes, Ariel was gone again. For all her bright coloration, the mermaid could disappear whenever she wanted to.

Belle leaned her head back against the rocks, flexing her fingers. The cuffs still held her up, but they had allowed her to drop the voice. Her orgasm must have been the ‘right moment.’ It had certainly felt right for her. What had Rumpelstiltskin thought of what he had just seen? She would have to find out what he could be inspired to--

The song filled Belle suddenly. It started in between her legs and worked its way up to her head, down to her toes, out to her fingers. She didn’t even realize it was a song at first. It started as a glow. And not even a visible glow, but a glow of feeling. It was an emotion first--a warm but hungry joy, simultaneously contented and ravenous. Then it was a light--a pure, shining yellow blaze that would blind the unworthy. Then it was a song--the song that Belle had sung earlier, the song of the mermaid’s voice.

The joy the song filled her with was so complete and so powerful that all Belle could do was weep. Her tears streamed down her cheeks, dripping into the salty water of the sea. The song receded little by little until Belle could only hear it with her ears and not feel it with her soul. The mermaid arose from the water, singing.

“Your voice!” Belle whispered. It was bearable to hear the song, now that it was under Ariel’s control. When Belle had held the voice, when she had sung with it, the disembodied song had felt like the soul of music itself was trapped inside a ball. But now they were united, song and singer, and something in the world had been made right.

“Thank you!” Ariel spoke, her eyes sparkling. “Thank you so much! What is your name?”

“I’m Belle,” Belle smiled through her tears. “I’m so happy we could help you!”

Ariel’s smile fell as she looked up to Rumple. “Oh yes,” she said. “I almost forgot this was a two-human operation.”

“More or less human.” He giggled. “And the voice is working properly, Your Highness? Are you satisfied with your experience?”

The mermaid looked back to Belle and her face softened. “More than satisfied.” She glared at him. “Are we done, Dark One?”

“If you’ve finished handling my property.”

“Oh, I could spend a long time handling her!” Ariel gave Belle a kiss on the cheek and whispered in her ear. “Do you want to come with me? Whatever hold he has on you, we can protect you from him. You can live with me under the sea and tell me everything about the human world.”

Belle shook her head. “I can’t break my deal. But thank you.”

Ariel looked her in the eye. “Are you sure?”
Belle nodded. “I’m happy with him. I hope you find someone you can be happy with.”

“They say there’s plenty of birds in the air, but I don’t—” Ariel stopped and turned her head to listen at a sudden noise.

Belle heard it too. It sounded like barking.

The mermaid looked puzzled for a moment, but then her eyes brightened. “I think that’s a dog!” she said. “I’ve never seen a dog before! I-I wanna go find it! Good-bye, Belle!” The mermaid gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “Dark One, I hope our currents never cross again!”

“That’s what they all say!” Rumpelstiltskin waved her off.

With a final splash of her iridescent green tail, Ariel dove into the water and was gone. In the distance, Belle could still hear the barking, and the exasperated shouting of a woman chasing after her dog.

“Did you see where Ariel went?” Belle called up to Rumple.

“She went exactly where you think she went. I should just give her legs now and save everybody a lot of time.”

“Can you pull me up there? I’d like to see this.”

Rumpelstiltskin lay flat on his belly to reach for her. He leaned over the edge of the rocks to grab her hands and pulled her up to him. Belle knew, somehow, that he wasn’t using magic but simply his own supernatural strength. He pulled her up and Belle scrambled to the flat ledge, rolling him on his back in the process.

“Not just yet, my slut. Wait until we get home.”

Belle laughed and slid herself off his body, her limbs a disorganized heap on the rocks. “Where’s Ariel now?”

Rumple helped her stand and held her body upright when she found herself swaying. The ocean hadn’t left her yet.

“Look,” he told her, “down on the beach. See that little cottage? Our princess just made it to the rocks nearby. The dog is barrelling towards her at speed. And an unmarriageable spinster is resolutely following him.”

Belle leaned into his embrace, taking comfort in the warmth and solidness of his body. A woman trudged along the dune grass. She wasn’t old, but she wasn’t young either. She had plaited dark hair and wore a sensible gray dress. The woman walked with the rigid bearing of a sea captain, of someone who had control of herself no matter what storms she might have to weather. It was a posture Belle rarely saw in women.

“What do you know about that spinster, Rumple?”

“She’s actually an heiress of moderate means. Over the years she had many suitors, but she turned them all away because no man could ever impress her.”

Belle smiled and closed her eyes, rocking on her feet as he held her. “Ariel is not a man.”

“Not in any way.”
“Do you know what will happen to them?”

He pressed her close and inhaled the smell of her hair. “That’s a question that comes at a price, my girl. Would you like to go home and earn it?”

A shiver ran through Belle. “Or we could stay here. You could get into the water, and pleasure me like she did.”

“I’d rather fuck you like myself,” he said darkly, his arm wrapping tightly around her waist. “And I’m not going to fuck you without making you scream, and if the ladies heard that commotion they might think there’s something dreadful nearby and it might frighten them. We don’t want to cast a pall over their first meeting.”

Belle nodded. “How very thoughtful you are, Rumple.” She dug her nails into her palms, thinking of everything he could do to make her scream. “I’m glad Ariel has her voice now. She has a second chance.”

“That’s more than most get.”

Belle looked down at Ariel. Sitting on a rock near the shore, she was quite overwhelmed at the ball of white and gray fur that had jumped into the water to greet her. The heiress was shouting at the dog and apologizing to the stranger she hadn’t seen yet.

“We should give them privacy.” Belle said finally. “But will you promise to bring me back here someday? And take me out more places? This was a wonderful day, Rumple.”

He gave her a soft smile and kissed her forehead. “I like knowing what makes you happy, Belle. It’s very pleasant, to give you what you want.”

She rested her head on his chest and he transported them back home.

Chapter End Notes

One of the best gifts season 7 gave us was Rumpelstiltskin, proud foster dad to lesbians everywhere. Happy Pride month, everybody!
“And twenty,” Rumpelstiltskin announced as he turned away from Belle’s naked backside. “That’s enough.”

It was one week after the adventure with the mermaid. Belle was naked and bent over the dining room table. Her bottom was beginning to glow sweetly with pain. She braced herself for Rumple to strike her again. He didn’t. After a moment, she lifted up her head.

He had turned away from her, leaning against the table edge, standing next to her but looking in the other direction. The cuffs unlocked Belle from the tabletop.

“Rumple?” she asked as she stood up. They had only just started the game so her head was clear. She could think about how strangely he was acting. “Is--is that everything?”

He inclined his head to her, but didn’t move his body. “I think so. For now. I’m--I need to think.” He pushed himself away from the table and walked to the door.

“What?” Belle called. She grabbed her robe off the floor where they had left it and hurried to follow him.

He left the dining room and went up the stairs to the landing. Belle saw Rumpelstiltskin hesitate for just a moment in front of the door to the angry room. For the space of one heartbeat he looked at the door to the room he destroyed when a rage overtook him. But then he passed it by and went to his tower.

He stopped at the door, turning around to face her before she could follow him up the stairs. Smiling politely, he didn’t look her in the eye. “I’m going to spin.”

“But it’s the middle of the day.” He only ever started spinning at sunrise.

Rumpelstiltskin didn’t respond to her protest. “You can go anywhere.” He gestured an expansive space. “You can do anything you like. But don’t follow me. Not today. Do you understand?”

Why didn’t he want her around him? “Have I displeased you?”

He raised a finger, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. “That’s what I need to think about!” He whirled on his heel and closed the door behind him.

Sighing, Belle took a moment to put her robe on, instead of just clutching the fabric to her bare chest. She leaned against the marble wall and slid down until she was sitting on the floor. She didn’t have a spinning wheel, but she could think just as many thoughts as Rumple.
He had been strange ever since they had gotten back from the seaside. On that day, he had taken her—fiercely and possessively, his claws digging deep into her flesh—the instant they had returned to the castle. Just as he had promised, he had made her scream.

But in the days since then, he had become more distant. Still affectionate. He would still use her body and treat her well. But everything seemed to be a step removed in a way Belle couldn’t entirely understand. Rumpelstiltskin had always been theatrical, but lately he seemed to be playing the part of a master, without any feeling behind it. Perhaps he was playing in the role of himself.

And today it must have come to a head. Belle knew enough of Rumple to guess what had happened: He was aware of the change in himself, in his mood. He had pretended that it wasn’t bothering him, but then he reached a point where he couldn’t pretend anymore. He had to decide what to do about that change. He had to think, so he had to spin.

Had she done something? Was he displeased with her? Belle couldn’t think of anything that would have upset him or made him change his feelings toward her—whatever those feelings truly were. In her situation, she usually had the benefit of knowing exactly when and how badly she had disobeyed an order. But pain was a game for them, punishment without a crime. How would he let her know if she had actually done something he didn’t like?

Being left alone was enough of a punishment for Belle. She had always craved companionship, and now she had no other company but Rumple. If he ever decided he didn’t want to spend time with her, then she would have no one. Nothing. She could endure any pain he doled out to her, she trusted him to care for her afterward. But if he went away, if he cast her out, if he ever said he didn’t want her—how would she endure that?

Belle stayed on the landing for the rest of the day. The candles in their sconces burned low as the day wore on and Belle remained on the floor, waiting for Rumpelstiltskin. Whatever he had to think about, whatever change had happened to him that he had to reconcile, she wanted to be near him when he did. She wanted to know what was happening in his mind. In his heart.

When the door finally opened, Belle was dozing. There hadn’t been much else for her to do. The creak of the hinges woke her and she straightened up to kneel properly.

Rumpelstiltskin gave her half a smile when he saw her on the floor. “You weren’t here all day, were you?”

Belle shrugged. “I didn’t know how long you would be. And besides, you need to take me to a bedroom.”

“Yes of course.” His eyes were gentle. He seemed so calm now. “Do you care which one?”

She shook her head. “I trust you.”

With a wordless sound, Rumpelstiltskin took her hand and helped her stand up.

As they walked, Belle noticed that the candles did not brighten at their approach. If anything, it seemed like they were growing darker.

“Do you trust me, Belle? Truly?” He used his serious voice.

“Yes, Rumple. I have to.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to. You must accept what I do to you, but there’s no reason for you have faith in my intentions. You have every right to suspect me of all kinds of evil.”
“But I don’t, Rumple. I don’t believe you have unpleasant intentions. And when you hurt me, we have an agreed-upon method of compensation.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Your questions. Do you remember--” he swallowed back the words with a grimace. They were walking in near-complete darkness now.

“Do I remember what, Rumple?”

He stopped walking. “The day you found my son’s room, after I beat you, do you remember what you told me you wanted?”

That had been weeks ago. Had her request been troubling him this whole time? “I said I wanted more of you, Rumple.”

“Do you still?” He stood close to her now, his breath warm on her face. The light from the only candle in the hallway flickered against his green-gold skin. “Do you want more than what I’ve given you of--of myself?”

The last candle guttered out, leaving them in total darkness. Belle licked her lips. What was he offering her?

“Rumple, I will take as much as you will give me.” I want your body, she wanted to say. I want your heart. But she couldn’t ask for all of him. It had been an effort to make herself ask for any of him, even on that day when the desire for him had driven her to tears.

He took her hand and gripped it so tightly that Belle would not have been surprised to find a bruise around her fingers. When he released her, Belle knew that they had left the hallway.

It was still dark. Belle had no idea where they were, but she had been transported enough times to recognize the feeling. Out of instinct, she looked around her, even though all she saw was blackness. She could hear Rumpelstiltskin breathing next to her.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“The safest place in the castle.”

And where was that? But this was no time to ask him. Rumpelstiltskin was--carefully, but firmly--pulling Belle out of her robe. He grabbed her by the cuffs and pushed her to walk backwards. He could see in the darkness, Belle knew. She trusted Rumple. He wouldn’t let her come to undue harm.

Her back pressed against a firm surface. A wall. It wasn’t uneven like the rough stone in the dungeon, or cold like the marble of the finer rooms. Was it made of wood? The tower where Rumple spun was paneled in wood. Perhaps they had gone back there, perhaps that was the safest place in the castle.

Still holding her wrists, Rumpelstiltskin pressed the cuffs into the wall until they locked over her head. It was like when she had been bound to the rocks at the seaside. She could move her legs, but her hands would stay where they were.

But then, Rumple moved her hands down. Rumple stretched her arms out to her sides and in a sweeping arc as far up and as far down as she could reach. Belle imagined it looked like the snow fairies children make on the ground in wintertime.

“Will you try it on your own?” He stepped away from her.
Obedient even she didn’t have to be, Belle slid her hands around the panelling. She could move! The cuffs still bound her to the wall but she could control where on the wall her hands went. She bent her elbows to pull her wrists closer and further from her body. It was the most autonomy she’d ever had while the cuffs were holding her.

“Can you kneel?” Rumpelstiltskin asked.

Belle sank to her knees and the cuffs went with her, stopping at the place where the wall met the floor. “Yes, I can.”

“Can you take a step?”

Belle pulled forward, but the cuffs held her against the wall. “It doesn’t look like it.”

“Good.” Rumple’s voice was thick. She could hear that he was standing a little away from her.

Belle took a breath. “Rumple, what are we doing?”

His footsteps came forward, the sound of his boots heavy in the silence. “This is what we’re doing, my sweet girl. You will stay where you are. Your hands will stay bound to the wall. But,” he took a breath, “you may kiss me. If you want to. Any--anywhere you want to put your mouth. Or your face. You may rub against me, lick and suck and bite for all it matters. Whatever you want to do, whatever you can do within your present limitations, you may.”

Dizzy with freedom, with the possibilities he was offering her, Belle laid her head back against the wall. Was he really going to let her do this? She raised her head again when a thought occurred to her. “But you must come to me.”

“Yes.” He didn’t say more, but Belle understood. He could move out of her reach whenever he wanted to. He would evade her whenever he thought she was taking too much.

“And I can’t see you.”

“Oh, that’s for the best, my dear. No, you will not see with your eyes or touch with your hands tonight, pretty Belle. But all your other senses are available, and any other means you devise to get what you want.”

So many limitations. “Do you actually want this, Rumple?”

He made a strangled noise that someone who didn’t know him might call a laugh. “Of course I want this! Don’t forget who’s in control here!”

Nodding slowly, Belle knelt again. “Rumpelstiltskin, will you come to me? I would like to show you how grateful I am to be your thing.”

The echo of his footsteps was soft as he approached her. Belle heard his breathing, slightly heavy, and felt a little warmth radiating from his body. He was close.

Her lips puckered, and Belle bent her head to kiss him.

She hadn’t known, not really, how much of himself he intended to let her explore. If all he had allowed her was a chance to kiss his boots more thoroughly than usual, a chance to mouth her way up his tight leather trousers, a chance to nuzzle her head in that soft patch of skin his shirts left open at his neck—that would have been enough.
But when she put her lips to his toes for the first time, Belle knew that she would get more than just enough.

His toes, not his boots. She was kissing his bare foot. His toenails were talons, like his fingernails. Where they black too? Would she ever know?

For the moment, Belle was content with what she was given. His bare foot, offered for her affection. She kissed that foot--heel and arch and ankle--over and over. Rumple kept his other leg out of her reach.

“May I kiss your other foot as well?”

“One leg at a time, my dear.”

His leg, not his breeches. Belle found more of his naked flesh. His skin was warm and smooth--he had less hair on his legs than she did. His calves were thin, but shapely. The muscles in his legs were tight and hard, tense. He didn’t like this at all.

Through overjoyed to have access to him, Belle knew she needed to be careful. She couldn’t take more than he wanted to give. She kissed him slowly, with a pause before she moved up his leg. She rubbed her lips back and forth against him like a soft caress. His muscles relaxed in infinitesimal degrees.

He had knobby knees, and she kissed a circle around them. He put both legs in front of her now, and she kissed up his thighs, switching back and forth from one to the other. So much for one leg at a time.

His cock hung between his thighs. Belle felt it brush against her while she kissed his legs. She could smell it, the scent familiar amidst all these new sensations. For so long, that had been the only part of him that he had ever let her near. The thought of finally having free reign over it made her mouth water.

But there was so much more of his body to explore!

Resting her head against one thigh, Belle rubbed the flesh around his groin with her nose. “Is it alright if I save the best for last?”

Rumpelstiltskin made a noise. He swayed, as through unsteady on his feet. When he spoke, his words were measured, deliberate. “I am at your disposal, Belle. Whatever you can do, you may do.”

How much did it cost him to give her this? How much did he hate it? She remembered the first time he had taken her in a bed. All she had done was touch his naked thigh--but it had nearly driven him into a panic. He had never let her touch him before that night, never let her get close to his skin. What did it say about him that now he was? What did it say about her?

“Thank you, Rumple.” She kissed the side of his hip, the same spot that she had touched with her hands on that night.

Rumpelstiltskin jerked away. The movement was so sudden, Belle would have fallen on her face if the cuffs didn’t have her bound to the wall. The sound of his footsteps paced around the room. She could imagine him circling the area, like an animal trapped in a cage.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to--”

“I know!” he snapped, not angry, but clearly overwhelmed. “No, I understand your intentions. But I
don’t think you understand… You couldn’t ever understand…”

Belle understood. “Rumple, how long has it been since someone touched you?” In the months since she’d become his whore she’d had almost no opportunity to put her hands on him. Who else would have had the chance? Who, and how long ago?

The only answer she got was a grunt, a shaking rasp of acknowledgement as he frantically went back and forth in this small chamber.

“Do you want to stop, Rumple?”

The footsteps came to a halt. “Do you? I could take you to bed now. You can pretend this night was nothing but a bad dream.”

“No, Rumple,” she murmured. “Even if we stopped now, I would never want to pretend this didn’t happen.”

“What do you want?”

It was too important a question to be coy about answering. “I want to touch you,” she admitted. “I want to know your body. I want you to feel safe with me.” She faltered over this last request: “I--I want you to fuck me without your clothes on.”

Across the room, Rumpelstiltskin sighed. “Intimacy.” He said the word like it had a bad taste. “That’s what you want. You want me to succumb to the dreadful ordeal of being known.”

“It doesn’t have to be dreadful.” Belle’s voice had a needful, pleading hitch and she hated herself for it. “And you can deny me anything, that’s always been an aspect of our deal. But you want to know what I want, you want me to ask for things. So I am.”

He walked back over to her. “Will you stand?”

She did. The cuffs rested at her sides and held her against the wall. Rumpelstiltskin was close to her now. His hand tentatively reached out to cup her cheek.

Belle leaned into his palm, taking comfort in his touch. He could see her face. He would know how content she was, how happy to have him near her. Perhaps that would comfort him.

They stood together for a moment. Belle waited for Rumple to come closer, but he didn’t. It was up to her.

“Rumpelstiltskin, may I kiss you?”

He cleared his throat. “You already have been. Quite thoroughly.”

Belle chuckled. “Rumpelstiltskin, may I kiss your lips?”

With a ragged breath, he closed the distance between them. Belle felt his warmth--so close to her, but refusing to press against her naked body, refusing to touch her. She had to touch him.

“Rumpelstiltskin will you guide me?” She didn’t want to fumble in the darkness, not now when everything was so tense and tenuous between them.

With the hand touching her cheek, he tilted her head and positioned her in front of his lips. He didn’t kiss her, of course. Belle had to lean forward and make the contact herself.
Their mouths had met many times before this. But it had always been Rumple kissing her. Now, Belle kissed him. She pushed her lips to his, wanting nothing more than to push her body against him as well, to wrap him in her arms and hold him as he shuddered.

She opened her mouth, just a little, and licked his lips to part them. Thank goodness for her time with Ariel! Belle would have never been so bold with Rumple if she hadn’t had the mermaid to practice on. When she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he rewarded her with a sighing moan. Belle broke the kiss with a gasp, giddy at his reaction.

“I’m happy, Rumple,” she said. “How are you?”

He chuckled and she felt him nod against her forehead. “Never better.”

She kissed his mouth again and this time he kissed her back. Long and raw and hungry, the kiss kindled a fire in both of them. Belle pulled against the cuffs, yearning to embrace him. She wanted to beg him to take her now. Rumpelstiltskin braced his hands on the wall above her head. No part of them touched but their lips. When they broke apart, his breath heaved, as through every moment not kissing her was a physical effort.

They took a moment. They calmed themselves. They breathed together.

Belle realized that Rumpelstiltskin was still near her. They had broken the kiss, but not their closeness. Slowly, she raised her head to do something she had never done before.

She kissed his cheek.

His skin was warm and smooth. He didn’t have hair on his face, not even any rough stubble. After the kiss, Belle rubbed her cheek against his, like they were a pair of cats meeting in a barnyard. It felt good. There was a slight oiliness to his skin, perhaps a sheen of perspiration. Belle felt it on her face and smiled. Part of him was a part of her now.

She kissed down his clenched jaw, past his pointed chin and to his other cheek. She rubbed that as well. He bent down and she could reach up to his forehead. She kissed the furrows in his brow until he relaxed and the lines disappeared. Then she pressed her lips forcefully to the center of his forehead. Perhaps that kiss could reach into Rumple’s mind. Perhaps it would soothe his troubled thoughts.

Delicately, she darted her lips over his closed eyelids. Her heart swelled as she heard his breathing slow. He was relaxing, he was enjoying this. She placed once kiss on the tip of his nose, and then another on his mouth again. He kissed her back, but gently.

“Why?” he whispered in the darkness. “How?”

“What do you mean to say, Rumple?”

“I feel…” he took a breath, deep and steadying. “I feel like you value me.”

Belle rubbed her face into the crook of his neck. No high leather collar kept him from her. “I do, Rumple. I’m so happy I have you.”

“But why?” he repeated. “How?”

She rocked her head in the space between his neck and his shoulder. There were no words to give him. Intelligent as Rumple was, there were some things Belle knew she couldn’t make him understand.
“I just do.”

He didn’t press the matter further, and Belle resumed her exploration.

Every part of him was lean, Belle discovered. His shoulders were thin and bony. As she kissed down his side, she could have counted every one of his ribs. Who would have thought that the fearsome Dark One was so small? He was downright skinny! No wonder he kept himself covered all the time. No wonder he kept himself hidden, even with her, even now.

Belle kissed across his chest and rested against his heart. His pulse was loud against her ear. Even through his breathing had calmed, his heart still pounded out a rapid rhythm.

“Rumple,” Belle murmured, “are you comfortable?”

He snorted. “I’m managing.”

So why was his heart pounding? “Are you… aroused?”

This time he laughed. “I’ve got a naked woman rubbing herself against my flesh. There are men who aren’t aroused by that sort of thing, but I am not in that camp!”

Belle nodded against his skin. He was aroused. He could enjoy this, even if it left him vulnerable and nervous. She knew that feeling well.

She slid her cheek down his chest, moving away from the heartbeat. When she found one of his nipples, she nosed around the protruding bud. Rumpelstiltskin breathed in sharply at the contact, a sound that might have been pain. But it wasn’t.

“Are men’s nipples as sensitive as women’s?” Belle asked the question casually, as though enquiring about some trivial information.

“I’m not a man,” he spat out the words. “Or a woman. So I wouldn’t really know, would I?”

Belle snickered and breathed hot air onto the area. Rumple flinched but he didn’t move away.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she told him. “I only want to bring you pleasure.”

“You want to assuage your damnable curiosity,” he countered as Belle brushed her lips against his chest.

“I want to know what pleases your body.” She flicked her tongue out to meet his nipple, licked a circle around it. Rumpelstiltskin gasped and made a strangled noise that ended in a moan.

“Everything we did before tonight pleased my body well enough.”

Belle pulled back, leaning against the wall. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” he said through clenched teeth.

“You can order me to stop.”

“Oh, but then what would I do with this?” For the first time that night, he pressed himself against her. His manhood pushed against her stomach and Belle felt the length of him, the straining hardness against her soft skin. Belle moaned and felt her insides clench.

“This is how well you pleasure me, Belle.” Sliding against her belly, he ground his rigid cock
against her. “This is what your curiosity does to my body.”

She sighed and bit her lip, her eyes closing in the darkness. “Are you going to take me, Rumple?”

“No, my slut. You’re going to finish what you started. Get on your knees.”

The cuffs dragged her down to kneel in front of his manhood. She expected him to grab her head and force her mouth over his cock and fuck her face until he spurted inside her. That would have been enough for Belle.

But instead, Rumpelstiltskin stood motionless, just in front of her, as he had been all night. He didn’t say anything, but Belle understood: The rules to this game hadn’t changed just because he was hard. She still had the freedom to set her own pace, to explore of her own will. He was opening his body to her, but she could decide what to do about it.

She dove in.

With her mouth open, Belle felt around Rumpelstiltskin’s groin. His body had been hairless, but here she found wiry curls, very much like her own. The smell of him was distinct and wonderful—so much stronger now that he was aroused. She rubbed her nose in those curls. He would smell himself on her, the next time they kissed. Would that please him? It always gave Belle a thrill to catch the scent of her pleasure on Rumpelstiltskin’s face or fingers. Perhaps he would be the same.

She licked a trail down his cock—a longer journey than usual. There was a spot of wetness on his tip and Belle swirled her tongue around it until he moaned. But still he did not put his hands in her hair to control her movements. Still he let her do whatever she wanted. Planting a row of kisses as she went, Belle traveled back, closer to his body.

Below his cock, she came upon a loose, fleshy part of him. Was this the sack that men were so precious about? The part that common girls were taught to kick to defend themselves? The thing certainly seemed vulnerable. On someone as lean and bony as Rumple, it seemed ludicrous. When she put her mouth on it, he hissed and swore.

Belle pulled away. “Is it that bad?”

“No, it’s that good, Belle. Oh, fuck, but you are good!”

She smiled in the darkness. “What’s the word for this thing, Rumple? What should I call this part of you?”

A little breathless, he chuckled. “You don’t know? Smart girl like you doesn’t know anatomy?”

She snorted. “The words ‘scrotum’ and ‘testes’ don’t have the same ring as the words you taught me to use.”

Rumpelstiltskin sighed and brushed a lock of Belle’s hair behind her ear. “They’re just balls, Belle. Nothing to get excited over.”

“Balls,” Belle repeated, remembering the first game they had ever played together. She had hated saying vulgar words back then. Afterwards she had wanted to wash her mouth out with soap. But now there was nothing she wanted more than to have Rumpelstiltskin’s balls on her lips, to have his cock so deep in her throat that she choked on it.

She went back to the sack, to his balls. With her nose and her tongue, she explored the soft flesh of him. Rumple rewarded her with grunts and moans as she went. She had never had such control over
his pleasure before. She enjoyed it.

She sucked at him. Mindful of her teeth, Belle opened her mouth to hold first one ball, and then the other, rubbing her tongue over them in their sack. Rumple gasped and whined out his pleasure. So she was doing the right thing. Perhaps one day she would be able to fit both of his balls in her mouth at once. Would he enjoy that?

Whenever she needed to rest her jaw, she rubbed her face against Rumpelstiltskin’s thighs. She kissed him everywhere she could, trying her best to be tender and gentle.

“Belle.” His voice came from the darkness, breathless and strained. He swayed on his feet. “Please put your mouth on my cock.”

*Please*, he said. It was such a rare word from him. Normally, it was Belle who had to beg, and Rumple who relented. Now she knew why he made her do it. There was an unspeakable thrill that came from being desired. To hear him ask for what he wanted, even if it was something she would have done anyway, something that she desired too.

“Well,” she chirped, “since you said ‘please.’”

She swallowed half his cock in one motion. She felt him against the back of her throat and bobbed her head to take more of him, inch by inch. He was too big tonight for Belle to fit in all of him at once.

Putting as much of him in as she could, Belle ran his cock through her mouth, in and out. Her body swayed a little, matching Rumpel’s wavering. Still on her knees with her hands fastened to the wall behind her back, she lifted her bottom off her legs. The smell of her own arousal added to the overpowering scent of the cock in her mouth. Her pelvis moved of its own accord, in a rhythm that was like her mouth, only faster and wilder. Her mouth moved along Rumpelstiltskin’s cock while her hips thrust against his legs.

His moans and snarling endearments grew louder and faster. He was going to come, she knew it. She closed her eyes and let him take her, faster and harder. Somehow she knew exactly when to start sucking in earnest. When his seed exploded inside her she was already swallowing it.

He filled her completely and she gulped him down. She didn’t open her mouth until he was soft. She had kept all his seed inside her and as he took himself away, Belle licked up any traces she could find on his loose flesh.

Breathing heavily, Rumpelstiltskin fell against the wall above her with a *thud*. “Incredible woman,” he panted. “Give me a moment and then I’ll clean you up.”

“You don’t need to, Rumple.”

In the darkness, Belle could sense him push himself away from the wall to stand upright. “What?”

“I--” Belle blushed a little to say the words. “I’m not messy, Rumpelstiltskin. I don’t have any of your seed on my face.”

“What?” he said again. From the way his hands held her face, she could tell that he was crouched in front of her, examining her with his all-seeing eyes. “What did you do, my girl?”

She couldn’t hide her smile, couldn’t fight the pride in her voice. “I swallowed it. All of it. As soon as you came.”
“Fuck!” He took her hands and pulled her up so they both were standing. “Oh, fuck, Belle!”

With her still bound to the wall, Rumpelstiltskin took her face in his hands and kissed her, deeply and passionately.

“Spread your legs for me, will you?” he whispered.

Both of them gasped when Rumpelstiltskin’s fingers dipped into the sopping mess that was Belle’s pleasure.

“I didn’t realize I was that wet!”

“Woman, you’re a fucking lake!” He swirled three and then four fingers over Belle’s folds, rubbing against her pleasure spot, making her whimper and whine. He rubbed her in silence for a moment. Belle knew he was thinking.

Rumpelstiltskin came to a decision. “Fuck the price,” he announced. “I’m not letting this perfect cunt go to waste!”

There was no sound, no glowing smoke. All Belle knew was the moment when the pleasure between her legs stopped coming from the rubbing fingers, and instead came from something rock-hard and massive entering her.

“Rumple?” she murmured.

“Yes, it’s me,” he whispered. He was inside her, filling her. Not moving yet, but pinning her against the wall. “Once wasn’t enough, so I’m using magic to fuck you again. Do you mind?”

“No,” she whimpered. She didn’t mind, but it was a shock, and her head filled with a delightful fog.

“You feel good.”

He made a noise, a pleased growl. “So do you, my sweet, my whore, my perfect cunt. How would you like it if I fucked you with magic, hmm?”

“How--how would you do that?”

“Let me show you.”

With his cock still ramrod straight inside her, Rumpelstiltskin picked Belle up and pulled her away from the wall. He carried her so that she faced him, her legs hitched up over his waist. She wrapped her arms around him to hold on, pressing her hands against the muscles in his back and shoulders.

He set her down on something soft and uneven. A mattress. It sank under their weight and crinkled noisily when they moved. There was a creaking sound that accompanied Rumpelstiltskin’s thrusts. A bedframe, Belle thought. He had taken her to bed after all.

He pulled Belle’s legs over his shoulders, and she felt his chest against the backs of her thighs. With his cock pounding into her, Belle laid back and let the pleasure overtake her. She felt the full length of him in her cunt. This position allowed him to press deep into her core.

“Oh,” Belle moaned. “This is everything I ever wanted!”

After a few more deep thrusts, Rumple set her feet down on the mattress and put himself on top of her. Still thrusting, he put his hands on her face and trailed them down her arms. He found her hands and held them, pushing his weight against her. “You,” he whispered, “are everything I ever
His hands were in her hands, Belle knew. She could touch his fingers to the bone, feel his rough skin under her fingertips.

So how was it now that he was touching her everywhere?

The touch was light at first, a teasing breeze on her back and shoulders. It traveled down her legs and over her arms. Belle shivered like she’d had a chill go up her spine.

Then the touch grew bolder. She felt the firm caress against her neck and breasts and bottom. When it pushed into her pleasure spot, Belle cried out.

Then she laughed. “So is that your magic, Rumple?”

“Yes.” He kissed her cheek and Belle felt the kiss in a dozen places at once. He rubbed his teeth against her throat and she felt the pain all over her body.

“Oh, this is perfect!”

“Good.” He thrust his cock into her and all of his touches pressed down at once. Belle wailed at the sensation—*at every* sensation. His magic rubbed and pulled and pinched as well as his fingers ever did, but everywhere, all at the same time. His cock was hard inside her and she clenched around it, over and over. She screamed and jerked and had to beg him for a moment to breathe.

He gave her that moment. He stilled his thrusting, withdrew his magic, lifted himself off her heaving chest. He kept his cock in her and her cunt throbbed a steady pulse.

“Can you feel that, Rumple?”

“Oh fuck yes I can.”

“Good.”

When she was ready, he began to move again. His thrusts were slow and gentle, his magic a feeling of tender kisses and soothing rubs. His fingers stayed laced in hers. Belle breathed a long sigh, feeling his care and affection.

Gradually, his pace quickened. His movements became a little rougher and more demanding. The magic began to bite at her as his mouth sucked roughly at her skin. Belle felt the pleasure rising up in her again, though it came from a deeper place than her last orgasm. He wasn’t touching her pleasure spot this time. Her pleasure, she realized, was coming from the feeling of having him inside her and all around her.

She moaned and clutched his hands. Wrapping her legs around him she pushed him deeper into her. He went in, deeper and faster. The feeling came from her spine this time, from low inside her belly. She arched her back and her pleasure was a dark, rumbling howl, almost a sob. It felt so different, to come this way. There was no peak to it, no definitive moment of orgasm. There was only the constant, rolling frenzy of pleasure, and then the realization that it was all too much and she couldn’t handle anymore.

She made a faint pushing motion against his hands. To her surprise, he stopped instantly.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice weak. “I can’t… I can’t come anymore.”
Rumpelstiltskin laughed. “You know, I actually believe you.”

A wave of jerking pleasure ran through her. “I'm not a liar.”

“This is a level of pleasure that it’s difficult to fabricate. Not impossible, mind you. But difficult.”

“I’m not!” Belle protested. “I wouldn’t”

“I know.” He kissed her forehead. The soft touch of his magic wiped the sweat from her brow. Their bodies were still joined.

“So how—” Belle fought to find the right words. “How does this work? With the magic? How long will it last?”

“You mean how long until this ” he pushed into her “is satisfied?”

Exhausted, Belle nodded.

“If I didn’t mind paying the price, I could make it last for days .” He ground against her lasciviously.

“But I think that would be unfair to you, my sweet. Even the most voracious slut in the world has some limitations. I would have to provide you with reinforcements.”

Belle looked up. “Do you mean other people? That you would fuck?”

He kissed her and Belle felt his grin against her lips. “Fortunately, I’m not using quite that much magic this time. You can finish me off, Belle. I know you can.”

His words made her clench around him and he laughed.

“Yes, my girl.” He kissed her face, her neck, her breasts. “Yes, keep doing things like that and I shall be useless for any other partner.”

“Let me touch you,” Belle asked. “While you’re fucking me.”

His fingernails pressed into the backs of her hands. “What’s the magic word?”

“Please , Rumpelstiltskin!”

He released her hands and immediately began banging into her again. Getting close to his body was like swimming against a current, but Belle did it anyway. She threw her arms around his chest like she was clinging to a life raft. Only gradually did she begin to move her hands over his back, feeling his sweat and his smooth skin against her palms.

She embraced him as he pounded into her. She rubbed her hands into his crinkly hair and kissed his face, his throat. Working her way down, she touched his chest, his nipples. Rumpel gasped and she bent her head to suck on him. His thrusts became faster and faster, growing erratic as he came closer to his completion.

Following his body, Rumple’s magic grew frantic and frenzied. Belle felt it everywhere—in her hair, between her toes, in the undersides of her knees. It was touching and kissing and biting and caressing. It filled her with every feeling, with every possible pleasure and pain on every single spot on her body all at the same time.

She convulsed with yet another orgasm and heard Rumpel shouting and swearing above her. He came with a roar, with a final burst of magic that embraced Belle with a sweet fire and then burned itself out as he collapsed onto her chest.
His body jerked insensibly, and Belle was just as bad. He rolled off of her and they lay together for a moment, both of them twitching and shuddering with pleasure. There was a puddle between Belle’s legs, hot and sticky. Both of their pleasures mingling together.

With a grunt of great effort, Rumpelstiltskin pushed himself up to reach out to Belle. He put his hand on her cheek. “I promise you, I’m not dead.”

And then he flopped onto the mattress like a corpse.

Belle blinked. “Rumple?” she asked.

For a terrible moment, there was nothing but silence. Then, Rumpelstiltskin began to snore.

Oh.

“So you do sleep,” she remarked. “At least sometimes.”

More snoring. How exhausted was he, to fall asleep so quickly? But she was just as tired. He had certainly given her more of himself than he ever had before. He had given her more than she would have ever asked for.

Feeling around on the bed, Belle found a sheepskin, as well as a knitted blanket. She covered Rumpelstiltskin as best she could, and then spread the blankets to cover herself as well. It was warm with his body under the covers with her.

He would still want her to touch herself. With a tired groan, Belle put her hand between her legs. Lying next to Rumpelstiltskin’s sleeping body, Belle jerked and convulsed to the thought of what they would do once he awoke.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies to anyone who (like me) finds the word "balls" inherently hilarious and unsexy. I won't use the word much after this chapter.
**The Sun**

Chapter Summary

They feel safe in the sun.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for Anger and shouting and anger-induced beating. Also, I don't know if there are a lot of Captain Hook stans in my readership, but be aware that Rumple's version of show canon doesn't portray Killian in the best light. Same goes for Millah, if she has any fans.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Belle was dreaming, she had to be. Nothing she perceived made any sense unless it was a dream.

To start with, she was warm. Technically, she supposed, that wasn’t too outside the realm of possibility. Rumple had been letting her sleep in various beds, in warm rooms with piles of blankets covering her. But she had spent so many nights shivering in the dungeon that it was still strange to emerge out of sleep feeling comfortable.

The sunlight had to be her imagination. All the bedrooms in Rumpelstiltskin’s castle were heavily curtained. All the windows were covered, except for in the tower where he spun and in the dungeons. And the light that washed over Belle now was not the weak, silvery day that filtered in to her cell under the ground. This was a golden glow of warmth that had washed over her slumbering eyelids and permeated into her dreams.

She had to be dreaming. Even if the warmth and the light were real, she had to be dreaming the body lying halfway underneath her. Such a thing was impossible. There was no way that she was sleeping on a chest as it rose and fell with breath. It was impossible to feel the added heat of a person beside her, impossible to hear a calm and steady heartbeat.

With her eyes still closed, Belle draped one arm over the warm chest, nestled her head into the crook of the neck that she was dreaming. Her legs tangled into legs that couldn’t be there, but she could pretend they were just the same. She could imagine this comfort, this happiness, of being in a bed with a man she wanted. She could enjoy this dream she was having, this dream of love.

She didn’t open her eyes until Rumpelstiltskin began to snore again. Last night she had been exhausted enough to ignore the noise, but now it pulled her out of her blissful slumber. Still staying where she was, Belle blinked awake and looked around.

The sunlight had been real. A glass dome in the ceiling over their heads let in a glorious dawn. Beams of sunshine poured over them, catching motes of dust in the air. It was a warm, strong light, unusual this far into winter. Lying in the sun, Belle felt strangely anointed, like she was being blessed.
Aside from the dome, there were no windows in the room. White plaster walls arched down from the ceiling until they met a section of paneled wood. Last night, Belle had been bound to one of those panels. She grinned at the memory. Last night, she had learned more of Rumple’s body than she had ever known before.

She looked over at him in the bed next to her. His eyes were closed, his face slack. He had fallen asleep after they had coupled, after he had used magic to prolong their activities. He had made himself hard twice in a row, then used his magic to pleasure her over and over.

And then he had collapsed, falling into sleep like a dead man. Belle knew he didn’t normally need to sleep, so this must be the price he paid. She wondered if there would be anything else. How long would he have to sleep before he recovered?

He was naked under the sheepskin that covered them. He had been naked all last night, and she had been permitted to kiss his body, to know him even if she could not see him or touch him. They had made their bodies one last night, both of them naked and trembling with fear and desire.

It had been wonderful.

Belle nuzzled into him while he slept, enjoying the feeling of his skin against her skin. Her lips brushed against him in soft kisses. If she kept at it, would he wake? Would he want to wake up to her kissing him? Or would he feel it as an attack?

Frowning, she turned her head. He was so cagey about being touched, about being known. She thought she understood why, why he would constantly defend himself. If the Dark One had spent years being feared and hated, he wouldn’t know how to cope with being treated gently.

It hurt Belle to pull away from him, but she knew it was what he would want her to do. It had probably only been an oversight that he hadn’t had the cuffs lock her to the headboard of the bed so she couldn’t move at all. That was the sort of thing he normally did.

She sighed and sat up in the bed. It was a well-made piece of furniture. Solid wood-- probably chestnut. The headboard was clearly old and worn, but it was still sturdy. The mattress crinkled when she moved. Belle put her hand down on the rough canvas that covered the mattress and felt for what was inside.

It was straw.

Every bed she’d slept in since Rumple taken her out of the dungeons had been stuffed with feathers. Her mattress at home had been made of wool. But this bed, the bed in the room Rumpelstiltskin had called the safest room in the castle, was filled with noisy, uncomfortable straw.

Belle’s mind went back to the little room she had found, his son’s room. Everything in that room was like this bed--it had been good once, but it had been worn and used until it was threadbare. Only meticulous repair had prevented the little boy’s clothes from being rags. And the bed Rumpelstiltskin considered safest was the bed of a poor peasant.

This bed was wide enough to accommodate both of them with room to spare. Belle understood why. This was the only bed that would be in a poor man’s house. Typically, a man and his wife and the children would all sleep together in a bed like this. Anyone else would have a pallet on the floor. That was how the villagers lived in Belle’s town.

Had this been Rumpelstiltskin’s bed? Had it been in the home where he’d lived before had taken up residence in a castle? Had the bed been a gift from his parents? A wedding gift? Had Rumple spent
his wedding night in this bed? Had he slept here, in his life before, with the woman he had loved? Had his son been conceived where Belle lay right now? Had the boy been born in this bed?

The image came into her mind, of Rumpelstiltskin in this bed, holding his wife as she held their son. A young woman, exhausted from motherhood but glowing with happiness, content in knowing she was exactly where she wanted to be. A tiny baby in an embroidered nightgown, nursing at his mother’s breast, listening to his father’s voice. A family. All of them feeling safe and comfortable and loved.

Belle pushed herself out of the bed, her heart burning with a pain she didn’t want to name. She stood by the bed and covered her face with her hands. The cuffs brushed against her cheeks when she wiped the tears from her eyes.

No matter how much Rumpelstiltskin gave her, he would never give her that. She would never bear him children, she would never have his love. He valued her, she knew that now. He cared for her. He would treat her well for the rest of her life. But she would always be his whore, his thing. She knew that he could love, that he had loved. But he would never love her. No matter how tenderly he spoke to her, no matter how much of himself he offered her, it would never be the same as the bond he had shared with his wife.

To distract herself from these melancholy thoughts, Belle looked around the room. It was a circle, of no great size, the same shape as the tower. This room seemed to be just large enough to comfortably hold exactly what it held, with no room for any additions and no need for any subtractions. The bed was in the center of the circle, directly under the dome. Different pieces of furniture covered the wooden walls and Belle realized there was no door to this room.

At least, there was no space for a door. Any of the panels could open, she supposed, or there could be some kind of trap door in the floorboards. But she didn’t see any evidence of such a thing. And in this castle of wonders, it was just as easy to believe that this room didn’t have a door, that it could only be entered by magic.

There was a worn farm table along one of the walls, almost as long as the table in the castle’s dining room. But there was only one chair at the table where Belle served Rumpelstiltskin tea, where he beat her or fucked her however the mood struck him. The table in this room had a stool at either end and a long bench on the side.

Belle swallowed and thought again of his family, the meals he would have shared with them at this shabby table. She could imagine Rumple listening patiently as his little boy breathlessly recounted the adventures of his day. She could imagine him catching his wife’s eye over their supper. He would compliment her cooking, and smile at her for no reason other than because he was happy.

Turning away, Belle saw a spinning wheel. It was a smaller wheel than what he spun with in the tower, with an old wooden stool in front of it. Like everything else, the wheel looked battered and worse for wear. It wasn’t a surprise to find a spinning wheel in Rumpelstiltskin’s room. But it did surprise her to see that the wheel was surrounded not by straw, but by piles of fluffy white wool.

As she got closer to the spinning wheel, Belle saw that there was nothing on it but wool. The bobbin was half-full of neatly spun white yarn. There was a bit of fluff coming out of the wheel’s orifice, ready for more wool to be joined to it. Behind the wheel, Belle noticed a spinner’s weasel, a wheel-like device used to stretch out yarn after it was spun. The yarn wound around the pegs measured almost a whole skein.

This had been a part of Rumpelstiltskin’s life too, hadn’t it? Spinning wool into yarn. How long had he done that before he had learned to make straw into gold? How had a life that was now so magical
once been so mundane? What had changed? When had he lost his wife, his son, the home he’d once had that now he had made into a tiny part of his grand castle?

Dizzy with questions, Belle moved on around the room. There was a cupboard standing on its own like a wardrobe. She didn’t open it. Already she was learning more than Rumple would want her to know. There was no need to open doors that were shut, not now.

But the small table that seemed to function as a desk had no closed doors. All of the contents were out in the open for Belle to see. There were stacks of parchment, drawings in brown ink and black charcoal. Carefully, Belle leafed through the images. Most of them were of a baby, and then a child. They were in chronological order, she realized. Belle would be able to watch Rumpelstiltskin’s son grow up on these pages.

He had been a chubby baby, with a shock of curly hair, rendered in black. The artist had drawn him laughing, with bright eyes and dimples. There were many pictures of the baby sleeping--probably the only time he would stay still. The first drawing was of a tiny bundle, no bigger than a loaf of bread.

Belle smiled at a picture of the little boy, perhaps two years old, sleeping while lying on top of his father. Rumpelstiltskin’s hair was longer then, and he looked different when depicted in charcoal, but she recognized him by his prominent nose. Father and son were both asleep, both their heads thrown back in the same posture. Did both of them snore? Even in sleep, Rumple’s arms were wrapped around his son. The artist had neglected to draw his hands.

More drawings, the boy growing bigger, laughing less often. The last ink drawing was when he was about six. He had become a thin child, wearing the sorts of ragged clothes Belle had found in the little room. He still had dark and curly hair, but his eyes had become so sad. Too large for his tiny face, the boy’s eyes looked hungry. Perhaps they yearned for food, or perhaps he needed something more. At six years old, Rumpelstiltskin’s son had turned mournful.

Belle was halfway through the stack when the drawings on the parchment changed dramatically. Now they were all a child’s drawings, crude charcoals made on the backs of public notices. This must be the work of the boy himself, drawing as he had watched his parent draw.

Most of the child’s drawings were of animals—sheep and dogs and birds. He had an eye for detail and unusual patience for a little boy. When Belle and Andre had been small, her cousin had no time to sit down to draw the lines in the feathers of a bird’s wing—not while there were games to play with the other boys. Perhaps Rumple’s son hadn’t played with other children. Perhaps he’d had no company but animals.

She found a drawing of the little boy and—Belle smiled—Rumple. The boy had drawn himself with curly dark hair, and his father with a narrow triangle for a nose. It was just the two of them in this picture. Father and son held hands and walked along a road in the forest. They must have been going on a journey, for Rumple held a walking stick in the hand that wasn’t holding the boy.

The drawings grew more advanced as the boy grew older. People did appear, though none were Rumple or his wife. Belle came upon a picture of a girl, about twelve or thirteen. She was pretty, with lightly-shaded hair and a clever-looking grin. The girl had her hand on her hip and looked steadily out from the drawing. She looked fearless and strong. The boy must have liked her.

The last drawing must have been the boy himself. He was wearing a cloak over his dark mess of hair. He wasn’t smiling, but Belle couldn’t say that he looked sad either. Determined, perhaps, or resigned. The boy couldn’t have been more than fourteen years old, but his eyes looked out at her, steady and unafraid. His life had been hard, Belle knew, but even at that tender age he had grown strong enough to bear it. He looked at peace with what his life had become. Belle wanted to weep.
for him.

There were no more drawings after that.

Her heart and mind heavy with thoughts of Rumpelstiltskin and his wife and his son, Belle was ready to go back to the bed and sleep for the rest of the day. But then a golden glint caught her eye. It was on the table, scattered about with all the papers and other objects. At first, she thought the gleam was just a bit of golden thread, nothing unusual, even in this room of Rumpelstiltskin’s castle.

But when she reached for the gold, it felt familiar under her fingertips. It wasn’t a thread, she saw, but a fine chain. The gold was wrapped around the black hilt of a knife that lay casually on the little table, along with a doorknob and a dozen other disorganized objects. Carefully, Belle unwound the chain and picked it up. It was a necklace. Her breath caught in her throat and she didn’t release it until she saw the fragment of unicorn horn and she knew.

It was her necklace.

After all this time, she had it again. This was where he had put it. He had said he would keep it safe, and now she knew it was in the safest room in the castle. Her necklace had been the most precious thing in the world to her, and now she found that Rumple had kept it near the things that were most precious to him.

Tears sprung into her eyes and there was no sorrow in them. Had she been wrong about Rumpelstiltskin? Did he have room for her after all? If he could keep something of hers in the literal space where he kept the memories of his family, would he have a place in his heart for her as well?

Belle clutched the necklace to her chest. This had always been something he didn’t need. It had nothing to do with their deal, with her vow to be his whore. Once, she had thought him cruel for taking it, but now it meant so much to her that he would want it. He had taken her heirloom, her memories of her mother--but he had kept them next to his memories of his son.

She ran the pendant through the chain, just like her mother used to, and then put the necklace back where she had found it. Rumple had stolen it from her, but now she was giving it to him. She trusted him to have it, to keep it safe and never use it to harm her.

Picking up the knife from the table, Belle wrapped her necklace as it had been, around the hilt.

This knife, she realized, didn’t belong with the rest of the room. Calling a blade sharp was, of course, redundant. But there was no other word to describe the knife, to contrast it with the worn and homey objects she had found everywhere else in this safe room. The weapon seemed magical. It shone with newness, but there was something ancient about it, even older than anything else here. When she held it in her hand, the blade felt older than time itself.

There was a ruby on the pommel, red as an ocean of blood. The handle and cross guard were black. The edge of the blade waved as it went down, like no weapon Belle had ever seen before. On both sides, the steel was darkly engraved in an intricate design. Turning it over, Belle saw the name carved on this dagger, Rumpelstiltskin.

“What are you doing?”

His voice was sharp and as loud as the crack of a whip. Belle turned to look at him. She was still holding the knife in both hands when the cuffs pulled her to kneel on the ground. The jerking movement made her drop the knife and it clattered on the wooden floor.

Rumpelstiltskin’s boots marched steadily over to her. He bent at the waist and picked up the knife
carefully, looking it over as though Belle might have damaged it.

He had put on clothes, she saw. Scaly black leather and his coat. The Dark One was in fine form.

When he spoke, his voice was dangerously soft, his consonants clipped. He said every word slowly. “What were you doing?”

Belle thought she wasn’t afraid, but her heart still raced in her chest. “I was just looking.”

“If you were just looking I wouldn’t have felt anything. No, dearie, you were touching!”

“Yes,” Belle confessed, her head bowed. “I’m sorry, Rumpelstiltskin. I--I shouldn’t have touched the drawings.”

She couldn’t see his face, but she could tell when his posture changed. No longer a creeping menace, he stood upright, as though startled by something.

“The drawings?” he repeated, in a voice more like what Belle was used to.

“The ones on the table,” she explained. “The ones of your son. That is him, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he whispered. Behind her, Belle heard his footsteps go to the table. She heard the rustle of parchment. For a moment, there was no sound. And then Rumple said, “Is that all you were looking at? Is that all you touched?”

Belle tried to remember all she had done that morning. “I touched my necklace as well,” she said. “And that knife.”

“It’s a dagger,” Rumple said under his breath. “And I suppose you will say it is the least interesting object in this room.”

Belle nodded. “Though now I think it might be important.”

“It is.” She heard him place the blade down on the table. “Never touch it again.”

The cuffs went warm at his order and Belle stayed locked to the ground. She wanted to ask about her necklace, if she might ever touch that again, but she knew now wasn’t the time. Rumpelstiltskin remained just out of her sight. He wasn’t going to let her get away with this.

“So it seems you’ve learned a lot today, my whore. Are you ready to pay the price for that information?”

Belle nodded. She was suddenly aware of her nakedness, of her back and bottom jutting into the air while she groveled on the floor. Rumple was going to hurt her, but that was alright. She breathed. It really was alright.

The first blow was a solid thwack on her backside. Belle grunted from the shock that was no surprise. This was familiar territory, nothing she couldn’t handle. While she waited for her mind to fog, she tried to guess what he was hitting her with. It was sturdy, but not as heavy as some of the bruising implements he liked to use.

Another blow and she could feel that it was long and thin. A solid thing, not a whip or a crop. A stick perhaps. He hit her again and again and Belle swayed on her knees as she fell into a cloud of trust, that lovely paradoxical bliss that came from pain.

After a few more strikes, Rumpelstiltskin stopped. Belle heard him breathing heavily.
“Have you learned your lesson?” he panted. “Or do you still want to tempt me?”

Blinking slowly, Belle raised her head and waited for words to come. “What do you mean, Rumple?”

“Do you want me to stop?”

She lay her head back on the floor. “Am I paid up, then?”

“You are,” he breathed. “Unless you want to ask me questions about what you’ve seen today.”

Even in this state, Belle noticed the plural. “How many questions may I ask?”

“As many as you can bear, my dear. I will hurt you, and you will hurt me, until one of us breaks entirely. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

They had never played like that before, never such a clean exchange. Belle would be a fool to pass by such an opportunity.

“A strike for a question? Rumpelstiltskin, we have a deal.”

The noise he made was not the delighted giggle that she might have expected, but a more resigned and bitter sound. “Ask away, then.”

“Were you married to your son’s mother?”

“Yes,” he said, and hit her.

Belle rocked on her knees at the impact, but asked her next question without hesitation. “And it is just the boy, isn’t it? There are no other children?”

“No.” Another hit, this one pulling out a keening whine from Belle’s throat.

“Who made the drawings on the table, the ones of the baby?”

“Millah—” he said quickly and then made a face. Clearly he hadn’t intended to give Belle the woman’s name.

“That’s your wife?”

“Yes.” He hit her twice for the two questions.

“What was she like?”

This time he struck her before he answered. “She was a wild thing, who hated her cage.”

“She was unhappy?”

“Miserable.” The pain landed across Belle’s shoulders and she cried out.

“Why was she so miserable?”

“Because she never loved me!” A rain of blows fell over Belle’s back as he hit her again and again with the stick. Belle screamed and sobbed and pressed her body to the ground, begging for mercy that she knew would never come.

She didn’t know when it stopped, when there was no more new pain, when she realized that the
cries she heard were not just her own. Lifting her head off the floor, Belle saw Rumple in front of the bed. His back was to her, but she could see his head bowed in his hands.

Belle heard him weeping.

“Rumple!” she shouted. Belle pulled at the cuffs, her own pain forgotten. “Rumpelstiltskin let me go! Please! Let me go to you!”

The cuffs released her and Belle scrambled to her feet. She ran the short distance to him and threw her arms around his body. Embracing him through his stiff leather coat, she held him as tightly as she could. Belle held her wrists in her hands, keeping her grip by winding her fingers around the cuffs.

Pressed against him she could feel his chest heaving. Something hot fell onto her hands--tears, his tears. After a moment of her embrace, Rumpelstiltskin grabbed at Belle’s hands, clenching them so hard she thought her bones would break.

“I was not a monster then,” his words came between gasps and sobs. “I wanted nothing but her happiness, hers and my son’s. But I had nothing to give her, nothing that she wanted. She came to hate me. And then she left us.”

Belle’s eyes widened. “She left the boy behind?”

In her village, it was a brave woman who had the fortitude to run away from an unhappy life--usually from a husband who was unfaithful or a drunkard or who let his children go hungry. But even those desperate wives would take their children with them. Often, it was only for the sake of the children’s safety that women broke away from their husbands in the first place.

“I had to tell my son that his mother was dead,” Rumple said. “Because that was kinder than the truth.”

“What was the truth?”

His hand gripped tightly into hers. “It is an ugly story, Belle.”

She rested her cheek on the back of his coat. “Tell me.”

She felt him nod. “At the time, I thought she had been kidnapped by pirates. I thought that they had taken her away with plans to make her a bed-slave for the whole crew. I thought that if I tried to fight them they would kill me and leave my son with no one.”

“Oh, Rumple.” Belle rubbed her thumb back and forth against his fingers.

His voice turned bitter. “As it turns out, Millah had not been stolen at all. She had gone away willingly. Eagerly, even. She had seduced the pirate captain and become his second in command. I imagine she spent many happy years on the high seas, enjoying her freedom and her plunder while the husband she left behind raised her son alone.”

She shook her head against the leather on his shoulders. “I’m so sorry.”

He straightened up, his voice brightened. “Well, I got my own back. A few years after I lost my son, I found my wife. I learned the truth of her deception, saw firsthand how deeply she loved her dashing pirate captain.” He gave a dark chuckle. “I ripped out her heart and crushed it while he watched.”

Belle dropped her hands, broke the embrace. “What?”
Rumpelstiltskin spun around, grinning at her with his rotted teeth. “I told you it was an ugly story.”

She stepped away from him, suddenly aware of how dangerous the Dark One was. Her back was on fire, Belle felt the pain now. She would have bruises for weeks. He had hurt her badly, and for no other reason than to satisfy his own black and twisted desires. Had he treated his wife the same way? Was that the cage she had hated? Was that why she had left?

_No_ , Belle told herself. He was not a monster then. And even now, Rumple was _not_ as evil as he seemed. The smiling demon’s face was nothing but a mask he wore to scare people. Even now in the sunlight, he was hiding behind his darkness. He was trying to repulse her, trying to keep her away from him. Trying to protect himself.

Belle had seen him cry. He would not frighten her so easily.

She looked steadily into his glinting eyes. She kept her voice even. “Thank you for being honest with me, Rumple.”

His smile froze for a moment, then withered into an expression of sour defeat. He looked at her, and Belle could sense his mood becoming darker. Good. If he was angry at her and had the courage to show it, then she would face him head-on. At least the emotions that welled up from him now were honest. No matter what bile he unleashed on her, Belle at least knew it was coming from his heart.

He jerked away from her and paced a sharp circle around the room. His hands clenched into fists and then unclenched over and over. “Why don’t you _hate_ me?” he snarled.

He didn’t touch her. They weren’t playing now, he wouldn’t hurt her. Magic and rage swirled around him, an invisible but indomitable storm.

“How is _it possible_ that you have endured one _moment_ of life with me and not been _consumed_ with contempt and rage?” His head swivelled sharply on his neck in different directions, as though he were having silent conversations with a dozen different people at once. “How can you know me at all and not want to rid the world of me?”

Belle stayed where she was and watched Rumpelstiltskin. In her mind’s eye she saw him as a little boat in a stormy sea, helpless against the winds and rains of his own emotions. But she was a rock, a mountain. She had nothing to fear from his thunder and lightning.

“How?” he snarled. Grabbing her shoulders, he lifted her off the ground and shook her roughly. “What is _wrong_ with you? What kind of woman _are_ you?”

“A better one than her,” Belle said firmly. Her anger was enough to match his. She pulled out of his grasp and landed on her feet. She stood on the floor in front of him, resolute, immovable.

Rumpelstiltskin backed away from her slowly, clearly shaken by what was happening.

“I am not that woman and I do not hate you!” She filled the words with passion, with all the conviction she could muster. “I’ve never hated you and I’ve never said I did. Please believe me!”

He looked at her and did not speak. He was trembling, Belle saw, but he kept his eyes on her.

“I do not wish you harm, Rumple.” Her voice broke, just a little. “I don’t know what happened to convince you you were unworthy of—” Her voice choked over the word she wanted to use but couldn’t. “Of human affection, of physical intimacy, of basic friendliness. But all I can tell you is that it _isn’t true_! You have every right to happiness and safety and—”
For the second time, a word caught in Belle’s throat. A word she couldn’t say to him, even if she tried to show it to him with every action she took of her own will. “You deserve to be a person, Rumpelstiltskin. You don’t need to think of yourself as a monster.”

She was crying now, overcome by emotion. Belle closed her eyes as she stood and let her tears fall to the ground.

His arms wrapped around her body, and he held her. She let herself melt into the embrace, sobbing into his chest. Rumpelstiltskin comforted her, while she cried for his sake.

“Thank you,” he whispered as he rubbed her back. “Thank you, Belle.”

She cried for a long time, like a soft and steady rain. She felt the weight of all she had learned about Rumple today, a lifetime of pain and loss experienced in the space of a few hours. It was so much to take in. No wonder Rumple—who had lived this tragedy—found it easier to shut it all away. It was safer not to feel anything.

Eventually, Belle sniffed and wiped her eyes. When she looked at Rumple, he was giving her a cautious smile.

“Are you hungry?” he said softly. “I’m famished.”

He wanted to eat? She had never seen him hungry before. Stunned and curious, Belle went with him to the table.

When she looked at the farm table, she almost started crying again. Apparently the meals eaten here had not been as loving as she had imagined. Her mind’s eye was filled with images of Rumple and his wife silent over their dinners—each with nothing to say to the person they no longer loved. Or Rumple and his son, alone but for each other. And then Rumple by himself, thinking he had earned that fate.

Without thinking about it, Belle knelt on the ground by the stool at the head of the table. That was the place she was used to, when he took tea in the dining room. As she knelt, she heard Rumple’s footsteps stop abruptly. She turned to look at him, saw him staring at her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she realized. “I should serve you, shouldn’t I?” Belle stood up and began to look around. Perhaps there was a cupboard here like the one in the dining room.

“Stop,” Rumple said gently. “I don’t want you to serve me, not here. Not like that.”

“Oh,” Belle said, sinking to her knees again.

“It was a good idea, though. A good instinct.” He touched her hair as he sat down on the stool. “Would you like a tray, or shall I feed you from my hands?”

“Feed me, please, Rumple. Whatever you want to give me.”

It didn’t surprise her to find that in this room Rumpelstiltskin had very simple tastes. He fed her bites of hearty brown bread, each piece heavy with fresh butter. He passed down bits of yellow cheese—sheep cheese, if Belle guessed correctly—and slices of a soft green pear. Peasant food, all of it. Poor man’s food, but he seemed to enjoy it. Above her head, Belle heard him chewing, heard the smack of his lips as he sucked up the juicy pear. He fed her from his hand, and she kissed his fingers with every bite.

“I want to stay here,” he said when they both had eaten their fill. “For a little longer.”
Under the table, Belle leaned against his legs. "You said this room was safe."

"It is," he murmured. "This is the place where I allow myself to remember."

She rested her head on his knee. "I hope there are good memories."

Rumpelstiltskin touched her face, lifted her chin up to look at him. "There are many good memories in this room, though all are tinged with loss. Memories of my son, of my wife before it all went wrong. Someday I will come to this room and remember you, Belle."

He seemed so sad to say it, and so sure that it would happen, that he would lose her. She supposed he would, eventually. Over time, she would grow old, then she would die while he lived on. How old was Rumpelstiltskin? How long had it been since he had been a husband and father? How many years—or decades or centuries—had he been alone?

"Will you remember last night?" Belle tried to fix her thoughts on more recent events.

"Oh yes," he said. Then Rumple stood up and did something Belle had never seen him do before.

He took off his coat.

As he did most other things, Rumpelstiltskin undressed with fluid grace. He shrugged the scaled leather off his shoulders, caught the garment in one hand, and folded it neatly on the table.

He looked at Belle and offered his hand to help her stand up. "Last night was very good," he said. "But I think we can make this evening even better."

Belle licked her lips, her eyes darting to the thin silk of his shirt, the informal cravat at his neck. His tight leather trousers. "Do you think so, Rumple?"

"If you want to," he said quickly. "If you can--"

"Yes." She cut him off, silencing any words that would cast a pall over her desire for him. "I want to."

Rumpelstiltskin swallowed. "Your hands are free," he said with a showy wave. "I am at your disposal, madam."

She looked him over again. His whole body was tense as a bowstring. She kept her voice soft, gentle. "May I undress you, Rumple?"

He gave her a tight nod.

"And you’ll tell me if I ought to stop?"

"You wear my cuffs, woman. I will make you stop when I want you to."

Belle giggled at his ire. "Yes, Rumpelstiltskin." She stepped closer to him. "You can make me do anything."

As she undid the loose knot of his cravat, Belle felt his pulse pounding under her fingers. She removed the fabric and set it beside his coat on the table. She walked briefly away from him, and it gave them both a moment to breathe.

"May I kiss your neck, Rumpelstiltskin?" she asked when she faced him again.
He swallowed. The lump in his throat bobbed visibly. “You may.”

She did. Like last night, he was warm under her lips. His heartbeat thudded but his breath was steady. In the late afternoon light, she could admire the mottled green of his skin, the delicate golden flecks on the surface of him. She kissed the hollow of his collarbone and he sighed.

His waistcoat laced on either side, and Belle lifted up his arms to loosen the bindings. He breathed deeply when she removed the stiff leather. Belle remembered the formal corset she’d had to wear underneath her golden gown, back home on those times when she’d had to act the role of a lady. The garment had improved her figure and made her feel taller, made her feel like she was wearing a suit of armor—but it was always a relief to take it off and be her natural self.

She touched Rumpelstiltskin over his shirt. His flesh was hot, perspiring under her hands. Slowly, she pulled the hem of his shirt out of the waistband of his breeches. He kept his eyes closed, his face unmoving and unreadable.

“We’re running out of layers,” she said. “Should I take off your shirt or unlace your trousers? Or I could take off your boots?”

His eyes opened suddenly, as though a horrifying thought had just sprung into his mind. “Shirt,” he rasped. “Y-you should take off my shirt.”

“Thank you, Rumple.” Belle was almost cooing, her voice was so soft. He stretched his arms forward and Belle pulled the silk over his head. When they were done Rumple stood in front of her, bare-chested and glorious.

He was so small. Bigger than she was, but skinny for a man. He looked weak, even though she knew he wasn’t. Perhaps he felt weak too. Belle’s mind went to Millah, the woman who had left him to seduce a pirate. Did Rumple think women found a burlier body more desirable?

Belle put her hands on his chest, felt the lean muscles in his shoulders, the hungry bones at his collar. Her pink fingers splayed out along his green-gray skin. His nipples were darker than the rest of him, forest green, budding like new leaves about to come to life. Belle touched him, and he didn’t stop her. She cupped his cheek in her palm and trailed her hand down his neck and over his abdomen. She wrapped both hands around his waist and encircled him in her arms.

“It’s not much,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “But it’s the only body I’ve got.”

“I like it,” Belle said. “I’d like to see more of it.”

He nodded. With an air of gracious defeat, he gestured to his trousers.

There was a familiar bulge underneath the leather. Belle couldn’t help but grin to see it, to touch that hardness as she slipped the laces out of their eyelets. For all Rumple hated being naked and vulnerable in front of her, at least one part of him enjoyed it too.

Belle pressed her legs together, aware of how much she also enjoyed what they were doing. She thrilled to see him, to know his body, to feel his reactions to her actions. So often when he took her, it was for his benefit. Even her pleasure was something he wanted and he coaxed out of her body. But this way, maybe, pleasure could be something they could share. Something they could do together.

As soon as she pulled the leather trousers down from his groin, Rumple’s cock sprang up like a startled pheasant. Belle smiled when she saw it, feeling like she was greeting an old friend. It bounced up to touch his stomach, and Belle noticed that the skin of his lower abdomen grew more
golden in color the closer it got to his groin. The coloration drew attention to that area, made everything stand out. The sack she had discovered last night hung loosely below his rigid manhood, a bronze-brown shadow underneath the gold.

Like his nipples, his cock was darker than the rest of his body--a lush brown-green. The tip of it, where his seed came out, was a different color, more green-gold. Her mouth watered to finally see this mysterious thing that had so dominated her days and nights.

His cock always felt so massive when it was inside her, but when she looked at it, it was only a little larger than her hand. How had she had so much trouble fitting this lovely thing inside her mouth? Had she just been intimidated? Perhaps it would be easier, now that she could see what she was working with.

“May I touch here, Rumple?”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, Belle. You may touch me.”

She placed her hand on his stomach and slowly moved down to stroke the tight curls that surrounded his cock. Their eyes met, and he looked at her in wonder as she traced over his hips, touching the places where his groin met his legs. She reached out to touch his back and felt the pronounced curve a very round bottom. Could men have backsides like that, so shapely and well-formed? She resolved to learn more about that later. For now, Belle’s hands rubbed gentle circles all around his lower half, gradually making the circles smaller as she came closer to her target.

“You’re teasing me,” he whispered.

“I’m getting to know you,” she countered. “All of you, not just the pleasurable bits.”

Rumple groaned. “I want to order you,” he said through gritted teeth.

Lightly, she ran her fingers over his cock. “Order me to stop?”

“Order you to fondle my balls and ready your throat for my cock. *Fuck!* ” He said it all in one breath, his teeth clenched, his hands balled into fists pressed at his sides.

Belle’s hand gently cupped the fleshy sack between his legs. Her fingers grazed over the strange, soft parts of him, so vulnerable, but so easily pleasured. She kept her gaze on his body. “We can do that.”

He grunted a refusal. “When you’re done with all of this, I want to go to the bed again. I want you to get on top of me. I want you to *ride me*, Belle. Ride my cock and take everything you want from me.”

Belle swallowed. She felt herself grow wetter at his words. “Promise me one thing, Rumple. Promise me that I will see you naked again.”

He gave out a breathy laugh. “If that’s what you want, sweet girl.”

Belle turned her attention from the sight of her pale fingers wrapped around his dark cock and looked up at his face. “It is,” she said. “May we go to the bed now?”

Without a word, Rumple picked her up and carried her to his bed, magicking away his boots and trousers as he walked. They fell on the bed together, and Rumple kissed her, slowly and deeply.

“You are wonderful, my Belle. You deserve to get everything good in the world.”
She threw her arms around his back, holding him to her. “I don’t care about getting what I deserve as long as I get what I want.”

His eyes searched her face. “And what is that?”

“You.” She kissed him. Rumple let her control the kiss, but moved them both so that he was lying underneath her. His cock pressed up in the space between them, hard and inviting, reaching out to her. Belle rubbed her slick folds along the shaft and let him feel her need.

“Fuck,” Rumple whispered. “Will you open your cunt, Belle?”

“Will you do it for me? Will you put your cock inside me, Rumple?” She wanted to touch her, wanted him to carry the smell of her pleasure on his fingers.

“If you sit up, my sweet. If you get on your knees and straddle me.”

Belle did as he said, kneeling astride his body while he lay flat on the bed. She closed her eyes as he filled her. When she opened her eyes, he was looking at her in lust-struck awe.

“You are even more beautiful in daylight.”

“So are you.” Her hips rocked over his cock as she controlled how deeply he went in to her. “In the sun, your skin looks gold.”

They took their time. Rumple coaxed and praised Belle as she learned how to pleasure them both in this new position. He fingered her, and she came around his cock, the joys of her body fitting neatly with the desires of his. She touched his face, while he was inside her, grabbed at his arms when a wave of pleasure overtook her. She rubbed his nipples and he swore and laughed. He took her breasts in his hands and made her clench until she nearly came again and only stopped when she begged for mercy. Then he made her come again anyway.

It was a slow, gentle pleasure they pursued. Even Rumplestiltskin’s orgasm was easy, almost lazy. He pulsed into her with a shudder and then pulled Belle down to lay beside him. He held her to his skin. Their sweat mingled on their pressed foreheads, even as their fluids mixed between their legs. They breathed together, both of them exhausted and both of them sated.

“By the way,” Rumple when they had recovered. “I owe you an apology, for that tantrum after we were done with the game. It wasn’t… That’s not the way I want to act around you. I’m sorry.”

Belle nuzzled into his shoulder. “You were upset.”

“That doesn’t give me licence to shout at you.”

“I shouted right back.”

He squeezed her and kissed her forehead. “I’m glad you did. But I must pay you for the harm I did to you. Is it possible you want anything other than a question?”

Belle giggled. “I still have too many questions about you to accept any other reward.”

“Alright,” he conceded. “But make it a good one. Don’t ask me what the weather’s going to be tomorrow. Ask me something that hurts.”

She didn’t want to hurt him, she never did. But she understood how his internal ledgers had to balance. He was inviting her to ask him an important question. And he would answer it, no matter
what.

Belle took a deep breath. “What was your son’s name?”

For a moment, Rumpelstiltskin was silent. But as the winter sun sank from the glass dome overhead and left them in a murky twilight, he answered:

“Baelfire.”
They have some ideas

Things were different, after that lovely day in the sunlight, but Belle knew that they were also, ultimately, the same. Rumpelstiltskin still took her to a different bedroom every night. He still made her eat off a tray on the floor. He still hurt her when the mood struck him or when she chose to serve him tea with the chipped cup. He still ordered her about and made her kiss his boots. He still maintained his order that she touch her secret places every night before she slept. She was still his whore, his slut, his thing.

But he gave more of himself to her. He let himself be naked when they coupled, though he still preferred to be unseen, coming to her bed under the cover of darkness. He didn’t use the cuffs to bind her when they were together like that. He let her touch his body while he touched hers. Their encounters were no longer just him taking her, but both of them working together to create a pleasure they would both enjoy.

He was telling her more about himself, freely answering the questions she earned when she gave him pleasure or endured pain. He told her stories about his son, Baelfire, about what a good and brave boy he had been. In bits and pieces, Belle learned that Rumple had lost his son when the boy was a little older than fourteen. He never said how, only that it was his fault.

She hoped it helped him, to say these things out loud. There was so much pain in Rumpelstiltskin, so much sorrow and anger. Belle couldn’t imagine the weight of these emotions, especially if they were unshared, unknown. It must be so exhausting, to keep himself a secret from everyone he’d ever met.

Belle wanted to know him. She wanted to pull away the layers of his secrets just as she had gotten through the layers of his clothes, no matter how long it had taken. And she wanted to help him. If she could shoulder some of his burden, if she could give him peace, if she could be just one person he could trust with his secrets--then Belle would know that she was truly doing her duty by him.

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One morning, Belle ate her breakfast on her hands and knees on the dining room floor. Rumpelstiltskin sat in his armchair. He was reading comfortably, with his feet crossed at the ankles and propped up on Belle’s naked back. He used her like a footstool while she ate off the floor like a dog.

Curtains on the windows kept away the cold winter sun. The fire was built up enough to warm Belle’s naked body. The two of them were quiet together, until Rumple snapped his book shut.

“I feel creative today,” he announced. “Would you like to try something new?”

Belle lifted her head up from her bowl, enjoying the pressure of his heeled boots against the arc of
her spine. “What did you have in mind?”

With his usual grace, Rumpelstiltskin took his feet off of Belle and hopped out of his chair in one motion. “I thought we might make a little magic.”

He gestured to the table. Belle stayed on the floor but sat up on her knees to see. Nothing had been on the tabletop before, but now there were two vials of a sapphire blue potion and two spools of golden thread. Belle felt something flutter inside her at the sight of those spools.

“Are you going to tie me up again, Rumple?”

He grinned down at her. “Would you like that?”

Belle nodded. Usually, he used the cuffs to bind her wrists and lock her to whatever surface was nearby. Over time, Belle had become accustomed to it. But it had been a wholly different sensation to have her entire body immobilized while she was wrapped up in his thread. She had enjoyed it, the only other time he’d done it to her. She’d liked being helpless and bound, utterly contained in a lovely package of his gold.

“You said you would make me come, the next time you tied me up.”

Rumple’s grin became a smile. “So I did.” He helped her get up, holding her forearms as he stood close to her body. So close they could kiss if he would lower his lips. “And so I shall, my sweet. And other things as well.”

Her heart pounded in anticipation. “What things?”

Keeping his hands on her, he walked her over to the table. “Take a vial in one hand, and a spool in the other.”

The cuffs pulled Belle to obey.

“Now, pour the potion over the thread. Make sure the liquid covers as much of the thread as possible.”

Belle used her thumb to pop the cork stopper out of the vial. The blue potion glowed emerald green when it touched the golden thread. She poured it out slowly, rotating the spool so she could get as much of the potion on as much of the thread as possible. After a moment, the green glow faded and the thread looked the same as it did before she started.

“Good girl.” He rubbed her shoulder approvingly.

Trying to disregard the pride swelling in her heart, Belle asked, “What’s next?”

He took the spool from her and unwound a bit of thread. “Hold this,” he ordered. “And throw the rest of it into the air.”

The cuffs let her put the empty potion vial on the table before she took the thread from Rumpelstiltskin. She took the spool in her other hand and gently tossed it toward the ceiling.

The thread went up in an arc, unspooling as it went. But at the moment when Belle expected it to reach its zenith and then begin to descend--it didn’t. Instead, the thread reached a high point, and then kept going, unwinding itself in the air above their heads in a loose spiral, just as it would have done along the floor.
The wooden spool fell to the ground with a soft *plink*. The thread stayed up in the air.

Belle gaped. When she tore her eyes away from the thread to look at Rumpelstiltskin, he was looking quite pleased with himself.

“And that’s the thread you’re going to tie me up with?”

“Have you ever wanted to fly, my dear?”

Belle looked up at the ceiling again, at the thread that hung, perfectly suspended, twenty feet above her head. She gave out a wordless exclamation. “And you’ll just have me float up there like a human chandelier?”

“No, a chandelier would involve me making you glow or perhaps setting you on fire and that’s not what we’re doing, not today.” His voice softened. “Though you would make a lovely firebird. Are you afraid of heights, my sweet?”

Her eyes didn’t move from the thread. “Until now, I’ve never had the opportunity to find out.”

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. “You’ll be safe, Belle. I promise. And I’ll be with you. Do you trust me?”

Finally, Belle tore her gaze away from the task above her to the man beside her. “Always,” she answered.

“Then give me your end of the thread.”

The process started with Belle sitting on the table, her legs swinging over the edge, facing Rumpelstiltskin. He pulled down a length of the floating thread and draped it around Belle’s neck like a scarf. The thread tended to stay where Rumple left it, though one end always lifted back up to the ceiling.

He looped the golden thread around Belle’s throat, careful not to let it catch in her hair. Cleverly, he made knots that wouldn’t tighten even if the rest of the line went taut.

“You can breathe, can’t you, my sweet? You have to tell me if you can’t breathe.”

“I can breathe,” Belle said. She heard her voice as distant and small, the same way it was when they played their pain games. It had been like this last time too. Being bound filled her with the same strange joy as being beaten. The last time Belle had been tied up, the thread had been enchanted to move on its own around her body. She had thought that it was the same as having Rumple do it himself.

But in reality, it was completely different to have Rumple hold the strings and tie the knots, to see his clever fingers work his gold over her skin. She watched his eyes as he worked, watched his focus, his intensity. She watched him stare at her but not see her. He licked his lips as he thought, made little noises as he worked out a solution in his mind. It was like watching him while he spun. Only now he was spinning *her*.

He looped a sort of harness around her chest, from her neck to her ribs. He framed her breasts in diamond-shaped windows and he was so intent on his work that his thumbs barely brushed against her raised nipples. He turned her around and tied her hands behind her, bending her arms up along her spine, binding them to each other and to the threads on her back. He wound the thread around her cuffs over and over.

“Now,” he said softly, “why don’t you try pushing off?”
“Off the table?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Try to make yourself fall.”

It didn’t take a lot of effort. Belle shifted her weight back and forth on her hips, scooting closer to the end of the tabletop. It wasn’t a high table, she told herself. It wouldn’t hurt that much to fall.

But she didn’t fall.

She was off the table. There was nothing underneath her bottom. She was still sitting, but sitting on the air. If she stretched her legs down she could make her feet touch the floor. But even with her feet pulled up under her, she stayed exactly where she was.

Belle looked at the floor, and then at Rumpelstiltskin. He was reading her face, looking at her for signs of distress. He looked cautious, but hopeful. When Belle laughed, he broke into a wide smile.

He reached out to her as she floated, his fingers barely touching her, as though she were made of delicate crystal. “How do you feel, my sweet?”

Belle shook her head, smiling like an idiot. “I’m flying, Rumple! I’m floating in the air!”

With a gentle push, he lifted her higher, his eyes glowing as he looked up at her. “I’m going to tie you a little more. Is that alright?”

“Oh, of course!” Belle breathed, giddy with freedom.

Standing on the ground, Rumpelstiltskin lifted Belle up until her legs were at the level of his hands. He wrapped the thread around her legs so that each calf was bound to each thigh but both legs were still separated from each other, pointing outwards. Then he tied her feet together at the ankles, wrapping the thread from her heels to her toes. He used the last bit of thread to tie the biggest toes of either foot together with a tiny bow. Now her lower body was contorted into a squat, her knees spread in opposite directions and her secret places lewdly open.

It was an awkward, uncomfortable way for her body to be bound. But Belle felt no pain when Rumpelstiltskin pulled her down just far enough so that his head was at the level of her cunt.

She heard him breathe in the scent of her, felt his fingers open up her folds and find her hidden sweetness. He pushed her body into position and she felt his tongue lapping up her wetness. He drank deeply and Belle felt her pleasure well up inside her. She squirmed against her bonds, wiggling madly as desire overtook her.

But before Belle could fully yield to her orgasm, Rumpelstiltskin pushed her up and away. Her juices made an obscene noise as they lifted off his mouth. When Belle looked down at Rumple, the lower half of his face glistened.

“Was all that just for me, my slut?”

Belle nodded, her mind fuzzy with denied pleasure. “It was, Rumpelstiltskin. All for you.”

He tapped her bound feet and Belle rose up again. Rumpelstiltskin jumped up and stood on the table to reach her. “Now what did I do to merit such a generous cunt?”

Belle knew her smile probably looked like a dazed contentment of a drunk, but she didn’t care. “You tied me up, Rumple. You’re making me fly.”
He prodded her leg with one finger and she ascended again. Belle looked down at the table and the fireplace and the artifacts Rumple kept on pillars to display. She was at the level of the curtains now, slowly rising up to meet the ceiling. Her heart raced. Tied like this, she was utterly helpless. But she trusted Rumple and his magic to protect her while she did the impossible.

Looking down, Belle watched him take the other vial of blue potion and dump it over the other spool of thread. The thread glowed green and he threw the spool into the air. Belle watched the thread unravel and hang suspended in the air in front of her. Rumple tied the loose end in a simple knot around his wrist. Then, with a running leap, he jumped off the table and into the air.

In Belle’s village, in the summer, farm boys would tie a rope to a tree branch that hung over the millpond and take turns swinging on the rope and jumping into the water. Jeanne and Mathilde always made excuses to be nearby while this was going on, because the young men would take off their shirts to swim. Belle had watched too, of course, but not just to gawk at the rippling muscles. She had been more interested in watching the boys’ faces. Belle liked to see the joy and exhilaration as they swung on the rope and then let themselves drop into the water below.

Rumple had the same joy in his eyes. He caught the thread that hung from the ceiling and swung in the air just like those boys. But he wasn’t going to drop. The momentum from his first leap was enough to let him circle the dining room twice before he slowed down enough to reach out to Belle. He caught her in his arms and they spun together from one end of the room to the other.

“I never liked the idea of flying,” he admitted when they had slowed even more. “And I never thought to use a levitation potion on thread before.” He kissed Belle wetly on the mouth. “I’m trying all sorts of new things because of you.”

Delightfully breathless, Belle rested her head on his chest. Her head and neck were the only parts of her body that she could move. “Just like me,” she said. “And all the things I’ve learned and done because of you.”

His hold became an embrace, he placed his lips to her temple. “Marvelous creature,” he said. “You are truly a wonder, my Belle. And so beautiful. It’s a shame that no one else will ever know how lovely you are, especially like this.”

“You could invite people over,” she said. “Just to look at me.”

He let her go at those words, pushing gently her so that her body spun as it glided across the dining room. Then he kicked off against the wall to join her. “Would you like that, Belle? Do you want to be an object on display?”

Belle looked down at the artefacts he had on pedestals below them. Her head was spinning just as much as her body. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Who would see me?”

“Everyone, if you want them to. I could parade you before queens and emperors all over these realms, set you up for public view in every city in the world. It would certainly be a popular attraction: The Dark One’s whore, a naked woman bound in gold, her body bruised and scarred but her cunt dripping with desire.”

As he said these things, his voice was soft and seductive. He pressed against Belle’s back and she tried in vain to rub against him, to slake off just a little of the desire his words had built in her. The images he brought to her mind were just the sort of thing she thought about when she pleasured herself at night.

“Do you want that, Belle?”
His hands rested on her hips, not nearly low enough to give her what she needed. Belle let out an aching whine and thrust herself as best she could, trying to grind against him. It was the first time being bound had been anything less than wonderful.

“Give me words, my slut, and then I will touch you. Tell me: Do you want to be my whore in front of other people?”

“Yes!” Belle rasped, the admission as much of a relief as the feeling of his hand against her heated folds. As he touched her, she was able to relax, able to let herself think for just a moment. “Perhaps not in front of everyone in the world, though. At least not at first.”

With a greedy, lascivious chuckle, Rumpelstiltskin plunged his fingers into Belle’s cunt. “Oh, why not, my dear? Why not let the whole world see you for what you are? My thing, my slut, my perfect woman!”

Reaching around from behind her, he pushed his fingers into her again and again and Belle could do nothing but clench around him, let her bound body lie back against him, feel the complete power he had over her.

She came with a shuddering gasp. She waited for her body to go limp, but it didn’t—it couldn’t. If anything, the threads seemed to tighten after her orgasm, forcing her to remain alert, to be present for what would come next.

He turned her around so they faced each other, each of them bobbing up and down as they floated. Rumple’s eyes gleamed with mischief and pleasure.

“So not in front of the whole world, you say.” He licked his lips. “But in front of a few people, perhaps?”

Belle swallowed, fighting her mind’s desire to fog over, to submerge her thoughts in a pool of lust. “How many?” she asked blearily. “And in what capacity?”

Rumpelstiltskin reached out to her, his black nails gripping the thread that bound her, and pulled her closer to him.

“No more than a dozen,” he said. “That’s as many people as I can stomach at one time anyway. And they would not touch you while I’m around. They would neither hurt you nor pleasure you. After all, the point of this notion is that you are mine. I’d be showing you off, not offering you up.”

After taking a moment to make sure she understood what he was saying, Belle nodded. “What would you have me do?”

He touched her face softly. “I would make you serve them,” he whispered. “I would make a slave of you for the amusement of my friends.”

Belle blinked. “You have friends?”

With a laugh, Rumple dropped his hands to her shoulders, to the threads that tied her arms to her back. “I have enemies I wish to impress, people whose talents I use, other monsters whose company I enjoy. But I’ve never invited them all into my home at one time.” He grinned. “I’ve never hosted a party before!”

Even as doubts nibbled at her, Belle smiled at Rumpelstiltskin. “Are you doing this just because of me?”
“Of course I am.” He nuzzled into her hair. “I’ve never had someone I wanted people to see before.”

Belle bit her lip, struck once again by the thought of how lonely Rumple had been for so long. “I want to meet the people who are important to you,” she told him. “If you want them to meet me, I want to make you proud.”

“Oh, you will, my sweet.” His hands travelled down to her waist, her hips, her soaking cunt. “After all, you’ve risen to every occasion I’ve put before you so far.”

With that, he lifted her up and let himself sink down so that they passed each other and only met at the spot where his mouth rested between her legs.

“Stay with me, sweet Belle. We’re going to do something new today.”

Newer than flying? Belle didn’t ask the question out loud, but did her best to stay alert as she felt Rumpelstiltskin’s hot breath against her similarly heated cunt.

He lapped at her delicately, seemingly mindful of how tender she was from the orgasm he had already given her. His tongue strokes were light but thorough, covering every inch of her. He braced his hands against her outstretched knees and dug his nails into her skin. Belle threw her head back and let out a shuddering moan.

While his mouth was still busy between her legs, Rumple’s hands slowly began to move up her body. He placed them at her waist and softly pulled his lips away from her splayed folds. After that he didn’t move.

He was waiting, Belle realized. Waiting for her to be ready for what was next. Her heart swelling, Belle took an exaggeratedly deep breath. It was their signal, after all, their sign of trust. If she could breathe, she would be alright, and when she took a deep breath he knew she was ready.

His hands moved, and Belle’s world turned upside down.

He spun her gently, in a slow cartwheel. Belle’s hair cascaded down into the air, reaching out to the floor below her head. He kept his hands on her and his touch became the only solid thing Belle knew.

After waiting a moment to let Belle adjust to her new position, Rumple continued to pleasure her with his mouth. He was slow, almost teasing. His gentle pace left Belle more aware of the blood rushing in her head than the pleasure racing in her cunt.

Disoriented as she was, it took Belle a moment to realize that she was looking at Rumpelstiltskin’s bare legs. With her back straight, she was at the level of his knees, looking down at his feet. He kept one ankle crossed in front of the other, so Belle could only see one foot at a time. His toenails were black too, she noticed. As black as his fingernails.

What if she arched her back? What if she could move up his body and put her face in front of something more interesting than his kneecaps? Wiggling her hips and shoulders, Belle tried to pull herself up.

Rumpelstiltskin broke away from her body and looked down at her. “Do you want something, little slut?”

Could he see her cunt clench when he called her that? “Rumple,” Belle whimpered.

“Yes?”
“Please give me your cock.”

“Mmm.” The noise he made was hungry. “Where do you want it? In your sweet cunt? Do you want me to stop using my mouth and fuck you properly?”

She clenched again, the threads pulling against her as her body tried to writhe. “I don’t want to refuse you anything. But I want…” She trailed off, unable to give words to her desires.

“‘What do you want, sweet whore? Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“I want your cock in my mouth,” she pleaded, all shame forgotten. “I want to suck you while you’re eating me!”

“Well don’t let me stop you!” He pulled her up with a jerk and pressed his lips between her legs with relentless frenzy.

Belle gasped with the powerful sensations, but her shock turned to pleasure when she felt his manhood rub against her cheek.

Opening wide, she sucked Rumple’s cock into her mouth. A spasm went through him at the touch and he briefly jerked up from her cunt. Good, Belle thought. Good that he was feeling just as much as she felt, that pleasure was just as much a distraction for him as it was for her. They had never done this before, never pleased each other mutually or simultaneously. It was perfect.

No longer gentle, Rumpelstiltskin buried his face in her folds, licking and sucking and biting with abandon. Belle didn’t let it stop her. She kept her lips wrapped around his hardness as though Rumple’s cock were the only thing keeping her from floating away. She sucked at him, holding him in her mouth, swirling her tongue around the tip while it was inside her.

She kept him down her throat even as he made her come. She gagged happily around him and choked on her own pleasure.

“Fuck,” he whispered as he rested his head on the inside of her gold-wrapped thigh. His cheek felt sticky against her skin, his breath panting coolly on her folds. Belle did not stop sucking his cock.

Upside down and bound and twenty feet in the air, there was so little Belle could do. She couldn’t stretch or move her hands or even open her eyes without becoming disoriented. But she was happy just the same. In this moment, in this wonderful game of trust and control, Belle didn’t care about what she couldn’t do. She was content, she was gratified, she was pleased just to do what she could. All she had to be right now was Rumpelstiltskin’s thing. A mouth for a cock, a sheath for a sword, she belonged to him, with him. As long as she was giving him everything, nothing else would ever matter.

He clutched her as he came closer to his completion. He clawed into her legs and bottom and he squeezed her more tightly than the threads ever had. He shouted as he filled her mouth with his seed. Belle gulped him down like wine and only a few drops of his blackness escaped her lips, trailing down her forehead and falling to the ground below them.

With Belle still upside down, Rumpelstiltskin pulled her up to meet his mouth. They kissed like that, pointed in the opposite direction and meeting each other by their lips. He tasted like her, and she surely tasted like him.

After that he held her, both of them lying horizontally in the air. They floated around the dining room as though it was a tranquil pool.
“How are you, my dear?” he asked softly.

Utterly exhausted, Belle nodded. “I’m well.”

“The potion won’t last forever. Are you content to stay up here for a while?”

She rubbed her cheek against his chest. It was still bare, his skin warm and sparkling. “As long as I’m with you.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “I won’t let you go, my thing. You’re mine and I’m keeping you.”

They drifted leisurely from one end of the room to the other, and only gradually did Belle realize how much heavier she felt against Rumpelstiltskin’s chest.

“Rumple?” She lifted her head up, pushing away from him as fear overtook her. Her helpless body glided in the air until it met the wall and she slid down against the curtains. “Rumple, I’m falling!”

In a terrible moment, Belle could feel the magic leave the thread. Completely bound, Belle couldn’t even reach out her hands to grab at something, anything. Desperate, she pressed her shoulder against the curtains but felt them give under her weight. The curtains fell and she fell and--

And then she was safe. And she was bathed in light. Rumpelstiltskin had caught her and he was holding her in his arms while he stood solidly on the floor. The heavy curtains had come tumbling down and the room was filled with bright sunlight.

Still bound, Belle looked up at Rumple. He was blinking at the new light, almost wincing at the adjustment from the castle’s usual gloom.

“You saved me,” Belle whispered. “Thank you.”

He looked at her as though he had never seen her before. His golden eyes washed over her face. She could see him try to force his mouth into a grin, but he couldn’t. He only held her closer to him.

“I’ve got you, Belle,” he murmured. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Leaving the curtains where they were, Rumpelstiltskin carried Belle over to the rug by the fireplace. He set her down and clothed himself, and then began to untie the golden thread from around her body.

It hurt more to be untied than it had to be bound in the first place. Rumple started where he had ended, undoing the knots that bound her toes and feet together. He had her wiggle them and Belle winced at the sensation of making something move that had been compelled to stillness for so long.

Lying on the ground, Belle watched as he unlooped the threads around her legs. The gold had pressed into her pale skin and left red stripes running up and down her thighs. Through her daze, Belle giggled at the sight. “I look like a peppermint candy!”

“Delicious.” Rumple kissed her knee and rubbed her skin, stretching her out slowly. “Do you feel as good as you taste, my thing?”

Belle closed her eyes and tried to lie down on the carpet. But having her arms bound behind her back made it impossible to get comfortable. “I keep thinking about what you said.”

“I’ve said a lot in my time. What are you thinking about?”

“About your friends. About you showing me off.”
His hands paused for just a moment. “Yes?”

“I want to do it.” Belle opened her eyes to see his face. “If you want to. I think it would be fun.”

“Sit up, sweet girl,” he ordered and the cuffs pushed against her back to lift her up. He kept his eyes on the thread in his hands. It pooled loosely on the ground as he untied her. He didn’t bother to wind it up along a spool again.

He didn’t speak until her arms were free. He helped her move and rubbed her skin and held her gently by the cuffs. “Would that really be something you want, Belle? Not just what you think I would like?”

She met his gaze and held it. “If there are other people in the world who know you, even a little bit, and whose company you enjoy, I would like to know them. I know I’m just your whore, Rumple, but if it would please you to have me among your friends, I would like to try it.”

Rumpelstiltskin swallowed and undid the knots around Belle’s breasts. “People would love to see you,” he said after a moment. “You would blow them all away.”

“And you said they wouldn’t touch me?”

“Not a hair on your head or anywhere else.” His eyes darted down and came back up to her face with a grin. “They wouldn’t dare without my permission.”

Belle giggled and offered him her neck so he could take away the last of the thread. “Let’s do it, Rumple. Let’s have a party.”

Rumpelstiltskin put both hands around her throat and pulled Belle toward him. She went to him with no resistance. Her body trusted him on instinct now, just as the rest of her did.

He kissed her—hard and deep on the lips—and when he pulled her away he said, “As you wish, my sweet. Let’s have a party.”
Chapter Summary

The sexy getting-ready chapter!

Belle knelt on the ground with her behind in the air and her breasts pressed onto the cold stone floor. The quill in her writing hand was a long plume, a bright orange feather from no bird Belle had ever seen. There was no ink in the quill, but when she pressed the nib to a sheet of Rumpelstiltskin’s strange dark parchment, it wrote the words out in gold. There was one sheet of paper in front of Belle and three on either side of where she knelt, so she was in the center of a semicircle. Each sheet was as black as the night sky, with swirls of red and gray moving on the paper.

She only had to write on one page. Out of the corner of her eye, Belle could see the words form on each of the other sheets—every stroke of the quill exactly the same as what she had written. The pages were all the same, gold on black, seven identical pieces of parchment.

Rumpelstiltskin stood above her in the little bedroom where she had slept last night. He dictated and Belle wrote down what he said.

“The pleasure of your company is requested at the home of the Dark One for an evening of drinks and convivial fraternizing. Dress code is formal, any undue hostilities will be frowned upon. Event to be held two weeks from receipt of invitation. Response required before sunset.”

Belle looked up from her writing. “Which sunset?”

“Tonight.”

“What?” Belle had hosted an event or two in her time and she knew the limits of reasonable hospitality. “No one can respond to an invitation in less than a day! How--how are you even going to deliver these?”

“Do you really need to ask, my girl?” Rumple bent at the waist and took the parchment in front of Belle between two fingers. He folded the black paper with a clean crease and summoned a gold-colored candle. The candle was already burning when it appeared in his hands. He dripped melted wax over the paper to seal the folded edges together. Without so much as a wince, Rumple pressed his thumb into the hot wax and showed the envelope to Belle.

“Watch,” he ordered, as if she had any inclination to look away. Holding the folded parchment between two fingers, he snapped his fingers against his thumb and the envelope disappeared.

“Oh,” Belle said slowly as she figured it out. “You made it re-appear directly at the person’s home.”

“The company I keep are often without permanent addresses. The magic will take the invitation to wherever they are, and they can send it back just as easily. Will you hand me the rest?”

Belle gathered six pieces of parchment and handed the stack up to Rumple. He sealed and sent the invitations in quick succession.

When he was done, Belle sat up on her heels with her hands on her knees. “May I ask you a
question, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“Are you prepared to earn it?” He seemed to deliberately not look at her, keeping his eyes on the air where the invitations had just vanished.

Belle leaned forward, just a little. Her breasts pushed out from the frame of her arms. Her secret places lifted up from her bare legs. “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t ready, Rumpelstiltskin.”

He still didn’t look at her. “Then ask away, sweet whore.”

“I don’t want to sound too self-important, but I thought this party was to show me off. You didn’t mention me in the invitations at all.”

Now he turned his head and gave her a small grin. “That isn’t a question.”

Belle dug her nails into the flesh of her legs. The little pain steadied her, grounded her. “Will your guests know about me before they see me?”

Rumple turned his full body toward her, looking her up and down. She saw him take in her face and her breasts, the nail-marks on her legs, the thousand different ways she needed him. They hadn’t fucked yet this morning. He had barely even touched her.

“Why do you think I had you write the invitations, my sweet?”

Belle frowned. “Honestly, I thought it was a game. I thought you would look at what I’d written and then punish me for any errors or misspellings.”

He made a pleased noise and crouched down to her level. “That is a pleasant thought, my slut. But think on this: Why would an invitation from the Dark One be in the hand of a young girl?”

Her mouth opened as she realized. “Because the Dark One has taken a young girl as prisoner and is using her as a secretary. That’s very subtle.”

“Just subtle enough, I think. I do want them to catch on, after all.”

Belle’s shoulders relaxed. “So are you like this with everyone?”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “Like what?”

“Twisted,” she said, for lack of a better term. “Complicated. You make yourself a puzzle. At least that’s how it feels sometimes. Getting to know you is like finding the way through a labyrinth.”

Rumple reached out to her and pulled her to stand with him. “Most people don’t bother trying.”

“I feel sorry for those people.” Belle thought of Rumple’s wife, of any other person who’d had a chance to know him and not bothered, made him feel like he wasn’t worth the effort. “They missed an opportunity to know a fascinating person.”

“Belle,” he whispered. It was all he said. His hands touched lightly on her upper arms, reaching up into her hair. He tilted her head and Belle closed her eyes, ready for a kiss—

_Pop!_

They both looked over at the source of the noise. One of the invitations had come back. It reappeared over their heads and slowly fell to the ground. Rumple stepped away from Belle to pluck the envelope from the air. He opened it and read the reply.
“Well,” he said after a moment. “It looks like the Doctor won’t be joining us. He says he’s busy with his experiments. I think he suspects some of the other people I’ve invited and is staying away to avoid embarrassment.” Rumpel smirked. “Just as well. Victor isn’t actually that interesting.”

Belle walked over to him. “Who are some of the other people you invited?”

“You’ll meet them all at the party.” Rumpelstiltskin tossed the declined invitation into the fireplace where it burned with acrid smoke.

“That isn’t an answer.”

“I know.” He looked at the flames and didn’t say any more.

“Rumple,” Belle said as she joined him at the fire. She stood beside him and put her hand on his back. He stiffened at her touch on his waistcoat, but didn’t order her away. After a moment, Belle tried to talk to him again. “Is there anything about the party that I’m permitted to know?”

“You can ask me anything,” he said distantly. “You always can.”

Belle nodded and considered her words. “We sent out seven invitations, and one was declined. Are we now expecting six guests?”

“Anywhere from six to twelve. I addressed each invitation to include a guest.”

She nodded again. “And people will be able to make the journey to get here within two weeks?”

“Most of my associates could be here within two minutes if I called them.”

Hardly surprising that his friends were magic-users. “Will the castle be ready for company in time?”

That got his attention. He looked at her, incredulous at the question. “What kind of place do you think this is, my girl? Did you forget who rules this castle?”

She gave him a grin. Finally, he was playing along. “Will you show me, Rumple?” she took his hand. “Show me how the Dark One entertains.”

With a glint in his eyes, Rumple pulled her into his embrace and transported them both to a dark and cavernous room.

“Have you found the ballroom before, in your explorations?”

“I think I have,” Belle looked around in the gloom. She could see an entire wall lined with curtained windows, only weak gray light filtering in to illuminate the dust. “But it was so dark, I didn’t see much.”

“Let me fix that.” With a wave of his hand, a thousand candles lit in three chandeliers over their heads. Belle looked up at the mountains of cut crystal, thousands of hanging prisms reflecting light over and over.

Now Belle could see everything. Wide-mouthed, she gaped at the mural on the ceiling. It was a skyscape, with infant cherubs resting on fluffy white clouds. The ballroom was three stories, with a gallery for musicians on the top level and a promenade above the dance floor. At a crowded party, those who had no wish to dance could go to the second level to converse, to walk around, to see and be seen.

But how many people would it take to make this space feel crowded! Belle and Rumple stood in the
center of the dance floor, beneath the largest chandelier, and they would have to walk twenty paces before they came to any walls. The room was lined with columns in warm-colored marble, with alcoves and niches set up perfectly for intimate conversations. The floor under Belle’s bare feet was polished stone, a rectangular design in the center of the oval room.

“This would be a wonderful place for a ball,” Belle said. “But I think twelve people would feel rather dwarfed here.”

“Perhaps if the party goes well we can be more ambitious for our next occasion.”

Belle bit her lips against a smile. How exciting it would be to have a ball here! She’d used to love dancing and parties. When she was younger, it had been a treat to go to her older cousin’s weddings. She’d loved to get dressed up, to watch her friends flirt with young men and maybe do a little flirting herself. She used to dance with every man in her family, and then with friends, and then, sometimes, with young men she’d only just met. She’d had no worries, then, no concerns about the next day or any time in the future. Balls were the times when Belle had allowed herself to live entirely in the moment.

The last occasion she’d been a part of had been her betrothal feast to Gaston—an event that had been miserable from its conception and the thought of which had only soured further with time. Had she even been aware of how unhappy she’d been at the time? Could she have ever imagined how happy she could become in entirely different circumstances?

“Will you hire musicians?” Belle asked Rumple as she looked up at the third gallery.

“I could,” he said. “Music-makers are especially eager to make deals with me. So many of them would rather sell their souls for supernatural talent than put in the work to just practice their craft. But it’s not really necessary.”

He pointed up at the musician’s gallery and Belle saw a flute and a lute and a drum lift themselves into the air and begin to play. Music filtered down to the dance floor. The song sounded cheerful at first, but the longer Belle listened to it, the more she heard the longing underneath.

“There’s also a harp somewhere around here that sings, I could try to find that again.”

“It sings?”

“The trick is getting it to stop.”

Belle snickered. “So we are well set up and entertained. I suppose food won’t be a problem?”

“The cabinet in the dining room will conjure anything our guests want. We’ll just need a serving girl to bring it to them.”

“That’s where I come in,” Belle sobered quickly. She had almost forgotten that part. Any party Rumple threw wouldn’t feature her as a guest or even a hostess, but as a servant. She was his thing, after all, and she would obey his orders in front of his friends just as she did when it was just the two of them. No matter what music played, she wouldn’t dance at this party.

Rumpelstiltskin rubbed a lock of Belle’s hair between his fingers. “You’ll do wonderfully, you know. There is no doubt in my mind.”

Belle stared at her feet, but nodded all the same.

“I’m making you a servant for all so no one person is able to monopolize you. You’ll always have an
excuse to get away from someone you don’t like.”

She looked up at him. “Will there be people I don’t like?”

Now he put both hands in her hair. “I am a monster, my sweet. I keep the company of creatures like me. And even after all I’ve done to you, you remain lovely and pure and innocent. It should be in your nature to despise creatures like me, just as it is in the nature of evil to desire sweet things like you.”

“But I do desire you, Rumple. I like the things you do to me.”

“I know,” he held her close to him now, pressed his forehead against hers. “And making you this way is, perhaps, the greatest evil I’ve ever done.”

“No,” she whispered. “This isn’t evil, Rumple. I can’t believe that what we do is wrong.”

He kissed her then, softly, sweetly. When they broke apart he trembled, just a little. He licked his lips. It looked like he was savoring her taste.

“But no one can know it, my treasure. No one at the party can know what you are to me, how you feel about your situation. No one--” His eyes lit up. He let out an impish giggle. “I’ve got it!”

Belle cocked her head at him. “What?”

“The solution to our problem.” He waved his hand and held out a large piece of jewelry. It was a band of gold, with a massive ruby set into the center. The band was so thick and so short that Belle couldn’t tell if it was a necklace or a hair decoration, perhaps some kind of fastening tiara.

Rumpelstiltskin tapped his fingernail against the flat facet of the ruby until a red light shone from within it. Then he held the jewel up to his mouth and spoke into the stone. “Thank you,” he said. “Excuse me. Right away.” He held the band out to Belle. “That should be all a serving girl needs to say to anybody.”

Belle looked at the jewelry in her hands. “What is your plan?”

“Put it around your throat.”

So it was a necklace, Bell thought as the cuffs moved her hands. But when she felt how tight the thing was against her skin, how high the gold spanned along her neck, she realized: This wasn’t a necklace, this wasn’t even a choker.

It was a collar.

Rumple? she wanted to ask. But the words didn’t come out like that. Instead, she heard her voice say, “Excuse me?”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded with grim satisfaction. “Keep trying to talk, Belle.”

She tried to ask him what was going on. “Right away?” her mouth said. The collar felt tight around her neck, as though it was squeezing out any other words. “Thank you?”

“Don’t take the collar off,” he ordered. “Don’t let anyone but me ever do it either.”

“Right away,” Belle said as the cuffs grew warm at his order. “Excuse me?”

“This is to keep you from saying anything you shouldn’t to someone who might use that information
“Excuse me!” Belle folded her arms over her chest, trying to let him know the strength of her indignation.

“Of course, I trust your good intentions, my sweet. But my friends are dangerous and crafty people. You don’t know how to protect yourself from them. This will help.”

Belle didn’t say anything at first. She tried to force down her irritation at being limited. She tried to see things Rumple’s way. She trusted him, even if his method annoyed her. “Thank you,” she said at last.

He quirked a grin at her. “Shall I take the collar off?”

“Right away,” Belle said.

He chuckled and stood behind her to unclasp the heavy gold. He brushed her hair away from her back and traced his fingers down her scars. “You should show these off,” he said. “Our guest will delight in your misery.”

Without the collar on, Belle could swallow and take a deep breath. “Will you hurt me in front of them?”

From the corner of her eye, she could see him shake his head. “That would be crass. And there’s no way for me to hurt you without fucking you soon afterwards and no one needs to see that. No one but you.”

“But you will display the evidence of all the times you’ve hurt me before? And all the times you’ve fucked me?”

“I think I will,” he said softly. “If it doesn’t bother you.”

Belle shook her head in a tiny motion. “I think I’ll be alright.”

He turned her around. “If you’re not,” he looked her in the eye, “on the night of the party, come and find me. I will stop everything if you need me to. I will make them vanish or send you away or erase the memories of everyone in the room so it’s like the party never happened at all. Do you understand, Belle?”

Weakly, she smiled. “How will I ask you for anything if I’m wearing that collar?”

“Kiss my boots,” he answered. “When you need to get away, stay by me and I’ll protect you.”

Nodding, Belle slipped into his arms. Rumple embraced her, rubbed her back and murmured into her ear. “You’re going to do so well,” he assured her. “Everyone will walk away jealous of me and the beautiful, perfect thing I own.”

“Yes, Rumple,” Belle said. Her voice sounded stronger than she would have thought. She could do this, she told herself. She could be his thing, even in front of strangers. She would make him proud.

He lifted her chin. “Would you like to try on your costume?”

“Costume?” Belle raised her eyebrows at the word, not disbelieving, but intrigued.

“You will be playing a part, after all. Acting in a way that is not reflective of the reality of your situation. We’re putting on a show with this party, you must look the part.”
“I must look like your slave girl,” Belle licked her lips. “And will you be playing the role of my master?”

As she stepped toward him, Belle saw Rumple’s tongue dart out from between his own lips, enticingly red against his green-gray skin. “Yes. I will be the lord of my castle, the master of all who enter my dominion, the host of a grand occasion!”

With a wave of his hand, Rumpelstilskin went from wearing a loose shirt and waistcoat to a stiff frock coat with a high collar. The coat was gold-colored brocade, worn over cloth breeches and a silk waistcoat. He wore a cravat at his neck--crisp white linen, embroidered with gold thread. To Belle’s disappointment, the cravat covered him to his chin, taking away the sight of his throat that she had developed such a fondness for. On his wrists, peeking out of his sleeves, there was the same linen. His boots were gold-colored, lacing tightly up his slim legs. In this costume, Rumple was covered from head to toe, armored even more than in the outfit he wore to make deals.

He presented himself to Belle with a courtly bow. “Impressive enough?”

“You look like an aristocrat,” she approved.

“Now let me dress you, my girl.”

Belle stood in the ballroom, naked and with her arms spread out, and offered her body to him. He built her costume piece by piece, starting with a wide golden belt that appeared when he touched her hips. It was a heavy thing and snug against her flesh. The shape of it dipped down under her belly to accentuate the shape of her form, to draw the eye down to her secret places. The belt only barely covered her curls. If she twisted her hips against the metal, there was a gap wide enough to see a few wiry strands of hair.

“Is it alright if they see this?” Belle asked Rumpelstiltskin, showing him.

He shrugged. “They’re going to see an awful lot of you, my sweet.”

A wave of his hand and a swath of wine-red fabric came down from the belt to cover Belle to her toes. But the two sides of the skirt did not fully meet, and a slit ran up the length of one leg, exposing it on one side.

Belle bit her lower lip. Strange how being partially dressed led to her feeling more vulnerable than being entirely naked. Long ago it had stopped bothering her to be around Rumple without even the protection of her robe. He knew her body so well that she had nothing to hide and nothing to fear. If he had ordered her to serve their guests without wearing anything, Belle might well have blushed scarlet with embarrassment, but she could not imagine having any fear or dread of the encounter. When she was nude, she could think of her body as merely a natural object, no more vulnerable than a tree or a boulder.

But once a part of her was covered, her mind could dwell only on the thought of it being uncovered. She had cloth on her legs, but it was only a flimsy piece of silk that could be blown away by a faint breeze, let alone the grasping hands of the sort of people Rumpelstiltskin called monsters. He promised that they wouldn’t hurt her, but wouldn’t it be clear how much they would want to? What would they want to do to her? What would these people try to get away with before Rumple stopped them?

What if he couldn’t stop them?

“Are you alright, my dear?”
Belle blinked. Rumple’s voice interrupted her frightened wonderings, brought her back to the present, to the here and now of standing beside him.

She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s all becoming very real now, what we’re doing, what we’re going to do.”

“It really is going to be alright,” he gave her a gentle smile. “Do you trust me, Belle?”

“Yes,” she answered automatically. Her fears were not gone, would probably never be gone, not until long after the party had already happened. But she knew that she belonged to Rumpelstiltskin. She was his, and anything that happened to her was what he wanted to happen. Belle trusted in that. She trusted him.

“I’m going to keep dressing you,” he said.

Belle nodded.

He kept his hands on her abdomen, trailing up the soft flesh of stomach. As he did this, a candle from one of the chandeliers floated down from the ceiling. It burned as it traveled, gold-colored wax pooling beneath the flame. He took the taper and held it in one hand.

“Will you bend back for me?”

It wasn’t an order. Belle could refuse. She could ask him what he intended to do with a lit candle and her half-naked body. She could try to run or fight if she wanted to.

Instead, she let herself fall back.

Rumple kept one hand on her spine to hold her. For the moment, he kept the hand holding the candle far away from her body. She was nearly halfway to the ground, her breasts sticking up into the air.

“Stay there,” he said.

Now it was an order, now Belle felt the cuffs move her arms to keep her in position. They made her freeze and he took his hand away from her body.

“Good girl,” he whispered. Still holding the candle, Rumpelstiltskin bent his body over Belle’s and sucked her nipples greedily into his mouth. He licked and bit first one breast and then the other, leaving her nipples hard and pointed, leaving Belle gasping and wonderfully dazed.

Then, while her flesh was still wet from his saliva, he turned over the candle and let gold-colored wax pour over her reddened nipples.

Belle let out a keening sound, unsure even in her own mind if she was feeling pain or pleasure. It should have been pain, she should have felt burning. But all she knew was sensation—-a feeling that made her cunt clench, made her wetness pool and drip, just like the wax on her body.

“Stand up,” Rumple ordered.

The cuffs held her steadier than Belle could have managed under her own power. Blearily, she looked down at herself. The wax had become opaque and metallic, hardening without cracking over the curves of her flesh. The gold covered her nipples and areolae but left exposed the pale roundness of her breasts.

Rumple stayed bent over her chest. He had conjured a spool of gold thread and was slowly attaching
the threads into the wax, joining one breast to the other. The threads hung down Belle’s chest in a series of arcs, obscuring the view but hiding nothing. She was still exposed, this covering only a decoration. It augmented her nakedness, put her on display. Anyone who saw her like this would know that she was a slave, and a pleasure-slave at that.

“We won’t bother with the collar right now, but you will be wearing it on the night.” He looked her up and down. “Your hair. We’ll put it up. On your knees, my sweet.”

Belle fell with a sigh of relief, kneeling as he stood behind her and brushed her hair. The golden threads were heavy on her breasts, the gold wax pulling at her constantly. It was pleasurable, but distracting, almost overwhelming. The feeling was the same as having Rumpelstiltskin sucking on her in the moments before he made her come—but without the satisfaction of coming, or the knowledge that it would ever stop. Belle found herself unable to think, unable to feel anything except the awareness of her own body, this aching whine of being constantly on edge, constantly almost to the brink of satisfaction, but constantly being denied.

Fortunately, Rumple didn’t demand her attention. He was absorbed in the task of brushing her hair and pulling it up on top of her head. Whatever steadiness Belle was capable of, it came from feeling his hands on her.

“There,” he said, as he fixed her hair into place and held it up with magic. “That will show off your scars nicely. I think I’ll mark you again before the night of the party.”

Slowly, Belle nodded. She had forgotten how heavy her hair could be when it was piled up on her head. It had been a long time since she’d worn it as anything but loose and wild.

“One last touch, my dear. You’re doing so well.”

“I—” Belle took a breath, tried to focus her thoughts. “I would very much like you to fuck me, Rumple. Soon. Please.”

He chuckled darkly. “I didn’t realize what playing dress-up would do to you, my slut. I think I like it! As I said, there’s just one more thing and then we’ll both get what we want.”

Still on her knees, Belle looked up at him. “What is it?”

“These.” He held a pair of shoes out of her, hanging off the tips of his fingers. They were golden, with heels almost as long as Belle’s hand. He held them out to her.

Belle hadn’t worn shoes since she had taken off the slippers that accompanied her wedding dress. The shoes Rumple gave her were hard-soled and solid. She stood to put them on and they fit. But the heels rose at such a sharp angle that Belle was practically standing on the tips of her toes. The posture elevated her, she was as tall as Rumple now, but it crushed her toes and made her teeter forward as she stood.

“Oh no,” Belle whimpered as she tried to get her balance. “Rumpelstiltskin, I don’t like these shoes.”

“You’ll get used to them,” he promised. He held her by the arms until she was steady on her feet.

“Would you like to make a game of it?”

Her eyes widened. “The wobble game,” she said with dread.

It was one of his favorites. The game where he counted every time she stumbled or moved incorrectly. The game where every wobble resulted in a flurry of lashes on her back or bottom.
He grinned. “You have asked me quite a lot of questions today. And I need to mark you. And you need to learn to walk like a slave girl.”

“And you said you would fuck me as well, Rumple.”

He nodded. “Yes, of course. How could I forget? Playing a game is a good way to take care of everything at once. Don’t you agree?”

Belle spared a moment to wonder how her feet could be numb and in pain at the exact same time. “What do you want me to do?”

“You should walk around the ballroom. A full circle, then come back to me. And don’t worry, I’ll keep count for you.”

The first step was the hardest, though the second was also quite terrible. Belle stuck her arms out on either side of her for balance. Her knees bent awkwardly and she felt like a hours-old colt discovering what legs were for the very first time.

“You’re already up to five, you know.” His voice called from not nearly far enough away. Five wobbles in less than three steps--how was it possible for her to be so graceless?

“It will be a miracle if I don’t fall flat on my face.”

“You’d better not, my thing. I want your face to look pretty for my guests.”

But what if she did fall onto this unforgiving marble? What if she chipped like her teacup? What if she broke her nose and blood spilled all around this beautiful space? What would Rumpelstiltskin do? Would he be horrified? Or aroused?

“It works better if you stand up straight,” he called from the other side of the ballroom. “You have to walk like you’ve got my cock up your arse!”

Belle stumbled forward, catching herself before any damage could be done. “That shouldn’t count,” she snapped, loud enough for him to hear. “That was cheating!”

Suddenly, Rumple was beside her, his voice low and muttering in her ear as she walked. “Do you think my friends won’t cheat, little whore? Do you think they’re above trickery and deceit? Do you think they won’t search you for weaknesses, body and soul, and then pry you open like an oyster?”

Standing up straight did help, Belle found. Taking longer strides--like a knight marching into battle--made it easier to walk without wobbling. “Then why are they your friends, Rumple?”

He got in front of her, walking backwards so she could see him as they talked. He gave her an impish grin. “Because I would do the same to any of them, of course! And they know it, and I know it, and we all tolerate each other anyway.”

“Right,” Belle said. What a bleak image of friendship that was.

They completed the rest of the circle in silence.

“Well,” Rumpelstiltskin clapped his hands once she was done. “You seem to have gotten the hang of that. Now try doing it backwards.”

“Backwards?” Belle protested. But she moved her feet anyway, if only to keep ahead of the cuffs. They would pull her if she didn’t obey and Belle had no desire to be dragged along the floor.
Rumple stayed with her, watching her. “You needn’t go so briskly,” he said. “Slow down.”

Instantly, the cuffs pushed Belle against her own momentum and she stumbled. “Don’t even tell me what number that was.”

He giggled. “Does it help if I tell you you look pretty?”

To Belle’s annoyance, it did mollify her. If he thought she was pretty, she was pleasing him. That was the whole point of everything, wasn’t it? “Might I see a looking-glass sometime?”

Rumple made a face. “I don’t like mirrors.”

“I know.” Belle had explored hundreds of rooms in the castle and found only a few mirrors. Every one had been covered. “But you really aren’t ugly.”

He snorted. “Take one step to the side for every two steps you take backwards.”

Belle had to think about that, counting steps as they walked around the ballroom.

“There are other reasons a mirror might be covered, my dear.”

“And what are those?”

“Take one step forward after you take your side step.”

“What?” Belle fell forward in her obedience and Rumple caught her.

He held her hands in his own and kept hold of her while she stepped. His steps, she noticed, were copying hers, only forwards and not in heels.

“Rumple,” Belle said slowly. “Why must a mirror be covered?”

“Mirrors are liars,” he murmured as their steps became more even. “They can only show what they see. And to the right eyes, a mirror might become a window. Malevolent forces might see in and see lies and act on those lies. Now start stepping on the other side.”

The pattern of walking backwards was becoming overwhelming. Belle adjusted her hold on Rumpelstiltskin, which brought their bodies closer together. He held only one of her hands now, resting the other on her waist as they moved. Still needing his guidance, Belle put her other hand on his shoulder. With him leading her, it was easier to find the right rhythm.

“What lie would a mirror tell about me, Rumple?”

“All sorts of things. A mirror would tell you that you are small and weak, that your beauty is the most noticeable thing about you. And if you looked at a mirror dressed as you are now, you would only see your costume. But you are not a slave girl, Belle.”

“What am I?”

He only smiled at her, as the enchanted instruments started to play music. The two of them continued to move together, and with a realization as slow but as certain as sunrise, Belle saw that they were dancing. They had been dancing for some time.

Belle beamed at Rumple as their bodies swayed to the music and their feet took the steps around the dance floor.
“The truth is complicated,” he said softly. “Real truth is a puzzle to be deciphered, not something to be taken for granted. A mirror cannot tell you the truth about what you are, about what anyone is.”

Still holding one hand, he let her go out for a spin. As Belle spun, she felt voluminous skirts twirling around her. She felt the glow before she looked down and saw it. Brightness had gathered around her body as she danced, covering her in a fine gown. He spun her again and she felt the glow become a bodice, felt it against her skin, even more real than the gold she was already wearing. He had put her in a dress made of light, yellow as the sunshine.

If she concentrated, she could see past the dress, see the costume underneath the illusion. But why would she bother looking at mere reality when she could have this magic?

Rumpelstiltskin looked at her, his black eyes reflecting the yellow glow. She saw herself as he saw her, a creature of light and beauty. He took her by the waist and dipped her as part of the dance.

“No mirror will ever see this,” he whispered. “And no one in the world besides us. *This* is real, my Belle. No matter what you look like, no matter how I act in front of strangers, no matter what happens, *this* moment is the truth.”

“Oh, Rumple,” Belle murmured, utterly enraptured.

They danced another circuit around the ballroom. He lifted her off her feet and spun her around. Belle closed her eyes and laughed, feeling free and happy. And there was another feeling there, stronger than mere happiness, a deep and abiding glow in her heart.

Gently, Rumpelstiltskin set her on her feet. The song ended, they stopped dancing.

“Twenty-seven,” he said softly.

Belle blinked up at him, still dizzy. “Twenty-seven?”

He nodded. “That’s how many times you wobbled, little one.”

Belle blinked again, shook her head to clear her thoughts. “Oh. Right. How many lashes does that get me?”

Rumple rocked on his heels. “Do you think you could handle a hundred?”

“A *hundred*? They had never gone so high before!

“If it’s too much, just say so.”

“No,” Belle said. “No—I can take a hundred lashes.” After all, she had asked so many questions already. And after the dancing, after that perfect moment of tenderness, they had to balance the scales with a little pain.

Rumpelstiltskin made a pleased noise in the back of his throat. “Perfect! Now let’s give them something to see!”
Chapter Summary

The party gets started.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On the night of the party, Belle sat at Rumpelstiltskin’s feet by the fireplace and tried to breathe. She always hated this interminable period before an event began—when all was in readiness and there was nothing to do. In the hours before her betrothal feast, Belle had spent a quarter of an hour moving every spoon in the great hall a hair’s breadth closer to the knives set out on the tables. Big events like this always led to that sort of fidgeting.

There was nothing for her to fidget with now. Rumple had made sure everything was perfect. The food was set out on the table, chairs were arranged in conversational clusters, and enchanted instruments played soft music. He had even left the curtains open, and pinpricks of starlight shone from the black sky outside. There was nothing Belle could do to add to this night, not until the guests arrived. With nothing to occupy her, Belle’s thoughts kept drifting back to useless worries.

What sort of people would be coming tonight? What would they think of her? How would they treat her? Belle had been trained to be a lady, to be charming and pretty and make polite small talk. But now she was playing the role of a servant, a walking object reduced to near-silence.

Could she do it? Could she demean herself like that in front of Rumple’s friends? Or would some part of her rebel? She wanted to be good, wanted to make Rumple proud. If she disobeyed him—if she even tried to—would he discipline her in front of his guests? Would he be angry with her? Disappointed? That thought, the thought of letting him down, was the most worrisome of all.

She was wearing her costume—the ruby collar, the terrible shoes, the gold threads hanging from gold wax on her breasts. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, exposing her back. Rumple had given her a hundred lashes and her flesh was a mess of slowly healing scabs. He hadn’t sewn her up this time—he had said that he made the cuts to be only skin deep, more for show than to inflict real injury. Belle’s long red skirt flowed onto the ground as she knelt at Rumple’s feet and dug her fingernails into her palms.

“You don’t have to stay down there, you know.”

Belle looked up at him. “Excuse me?” Her voice sounded different when she spoke the only words this collar allowed her. It was higher-pitched, and meeker. She sounded like a small animal, squeaking in the face of a predator.

Rumple set aside the book he had been reading. “You may come up here and kiss me, if you want to.”

“Right away!”

Belle scrambled to her feet as best she could in her high-heeled shoes. Rumpelstiltskin pushed the
fabric of her skirt to the side and helped her straddle him so that she sat on his lap. He had taken her last night and then again this morning, but they kissed as though they hadn’t seen each other in months.

He let her control the kiss, let her put her arms around his neck and suck his tongue into her mouth. Belle devoured him, hungry and needful and shameless about getting what she wanted.

Rumple held her by the golden belt at her hips. He steadied her, grounded her. He kept his hands there even when their mouths broke apart. Belle gasped out the first deep breaths she had been able to take all evening.

“Thank you,” she said. It was the first time the collar’s words had matched what she really felt.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned at her. “Do I detect a hint of nerves, my sweet?”

“Excuse me,” Belle nodded, her shoulders slumping. Rumpelstiltskin rubbed her flesh with his thumbs.

“You’re going to be alright, you know. No matter what happens, I’m proud of you already for going along with this silliness.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t think it was silly to meet Rumple’s friends, to know the sort of people he would invite into his home as guests. But there was no way to tell him that while she was wearing his collar.

“Almost everyone said they would come,” he said as he trailed his hands up Belle’s body. “But I’d like it just as well if they didn’t.” He fingered the threads that hung from her nipples.

It was the lightest touch, but it pulled Belle into a haze of desire. She whimpered and jerked her hips toward him without even meaning to.

Rumpelstiltskin looked up at her, his eyes black. “I wouldn’t mind having you all to myself while you’re wearing these.”

“Right away,” Belle whispered. Her body ached for him, for his touch, for his embrace, for the moment of satisfaction that would come after the party and put an end to this insufferable waiting.

Rumple licked his lips and pulled her close—but then abruptly cocked his head to the side. “Someone’s here,” he said. He set her to her feet and stood up. “Are you ready, my dear?”

Belle gathered herself and straightened her shoulders. “Right away, thank you.”

Rumple took that for the ‘yes’ that she meant it to be. “Perfect!”

He opened the doors that led into the foyer and they walked through together. This had been the first room that Belle had ever seen of the castle. She remembered his words that night, when he pointed at the other set of doors: That’s the way out, you won’t be using it. She had been so bewildered then, so unsure of what the horrible Dark One would want from her.

How could she have imagined that she would come to want things from him?

Tonight the front doors were opened and Belle could see out into the walled courtyard. Lanterns hung along the avenue from the front gates and a waxing moon hung low and yellow in the sky. Snow on the ground reflected all the light, giving the courtyard a dim glow. Belle shivered and crossed her arms over her naked chest, not ready to leave the warmth of the foyer.
Rumpelstiltskin stood outside on a middle landing, unaffected by the weather. He had his eyes in the air, at a swirl of orange magic that was changing shape in front of them. It looked like a tube, with a line across the top, but the outline of the thing was faint and sketchy. As the shape came into focus, it became smaller, the orange more vivid. It spun, as it traveled downwards, rotating like a flying toy.

By the time the shape reached the ground, it had become a solid object. Belle was so mystified by the magic that she didn’t realize the shape was a hat until a young man reached down and put it on top of his head.

“Jefferson!” Rumpelstiltskin called down, in a tone that Belle could only describe as happy.

“Dark One!” the young man shouted up to answer. He had a woman with him, and he took her by the hand as they ran up the stairs to meet Rumple.

To Belle’s amazement, the two men embraced each other like brothers. No, more than brothers. Rumple and Jefferson lingered over each other, both of them seeming hesitant to pull away. Jefferson kept his hand on Rumpelstiltskin’s shoulder for far longer than was necessary and Rumple didn’t seem to mind at all.

“It’s been too long, old friend,” Rumple said.

The young man squeezed Rumpelstiltskin’s shoulder. “We invited you to the wedding! And the baby’s christening! You’re always welcome in our home, I hope you know that.”

Rumple patted Jefferson’s hand fondly and gently pushed him away. “I did you a favor by staying away. But I thank you for not doing the same for me. And it’s so good to finally meet your bride!”

The woman was not tall, but she carried herself with complete confidence. Her copper-colored gown was cut to emphasize her large bosom and hips—the figure of a very wide hourglass. She was fair-haired, with a face so round and pink it could have been a peach. Her dark eyes sparkled brightly enough that Belle could see them glinting from where she stood.

“Dark One,” Jefferson said with an air of formality that Belle thought might have been affected, “this is my wife, Leona Ogg of Lancre.”

“Lancre,” Rumple said thoughtfully. “That isn’t around here, is it?”

“Not hardly!” Leona Ogg laughed, her body shaking and her round cheeks flushing red.

“And let me introduce you to Belle.” Rumple turned and called up to her. “Will you come down, my sweet?”

“Right away,” she answered, grateful that he hadn’t ordered her. Her terrible shoes and the long skirt made the stone steps particularly perilous. This was no time to be under the control of the cuffs. She walked, as quickly as she could manage, down to Rumple and his friends.

As she approached, she could see Jefferson and Leona’s faces shift from genial to startled. Not shocked, as far as Belle could tell. Perhaps they had seen pleasure-slaves before. But still, it was clear that they hadn’t expected to see one tonight.

It was the first time anyone but Rumple had seen her in this costume. It was, Belle realized, the first time anyone but Ariel had seen her since she had become Rumpelstiltskin’s thing. Her body trembled a little, and she tried to convince herself that it was only the cold, but she knew it was her racing thoughts.

Who were these people, really? What kind of people were they? Had they ever seen a woman
displayed as Belle was now? What did they think of her? Did they judge her? Admire her?

Belle squared her shoulders and held her head up proudly. Whatever they thought of her wasn’t important. She wasn’t there for them, she belonged to Rumple. She was his thing and he was proud of her. That was, she told herself, all she needed.

The three of them were silent while they all looked at each other. Belle saw that Jefferson and his wife were both wearing collars. They were simple things of brown leather, with an iron ring in the center. Belle had never seen that sort of thing before and she tried to puzzle out what it meant. Did they belong to someone too? Had either of them ever been what she was now? Or were collars just the fashion where they came from?

The couple was still staring at her, taking in her costume and her body underneath it.

Jefferson broke the silence. “Huh!” he said, adjusting his hat. “So I guess it’s that kind of a party?”

“Not today,” Rumple said. “For now the girl is just for show. Do you like her?”

“Coo, yes I do!” Leona sighed. She reached out to Belle, but then hesitated, her hand still halfway in the air. It looked like she was waiting for something, waiting for permission.

Belle gave the permission. She joined her hand to the other woman’s, greeting her like a friend.

Leona squeezed her hand and then released it. “You’re gorgeous!”

Belle blushed and smiled. “Thank you.”

She didn’t need their approval. But it was still a relief to find acceptance from the first of Rumple’s friends she’d ever met.

“You must be freezing!” Jefferson almost looked ready to take off his russet-colored coat and put it around Belle’s bare shoulders. He turned around to Rumple. “Can we go inside?”

“Yes, of course.” Rumple dismissed them with a wave. “Belle will get you some refreshments and then come back to greet the rest of my guests as they arrive.”

Obedient to the unspoken order, Belle turned around to lead them to the dining room. As soon as she turned her back, she heard both Jefferson and Leona suck in breath at the sight of her.

She turned her head and tried to give them a reassuring smile. “Thank you,” she said. It was all she could say.

Leona waited until they were in the foyer to bustle up to her and talk somewhat privately. “So is all of this fun for both of you or just for him?”

None of Belle’s phrases could answer that question, so she just smiled and shrugged.

Jefferson caught up with his wife. “In my experience, the Dark One doesn’t treat sex as casually as he probably could. I bet you either really like this or you’re getting paid really well.”

Belle gave an enthusiastic nod. “Thank you!”

“So both? Well that’s good luck. You’re living the dream!” He laughed and wrapped his arm around Leona’s ample waist.

Belle led the couple into the dining room and showed them the food. Earlier that day, Belle had spent
an hour taking heaping trays out of the cupboard and placing them on the table until it groaned under all the weight. Rumple had watched, keeping a careful eye that she didn’t wobble in her golden shoes. It was agreed that she would serve drinks from the cupboard, but the guests could feed themselves.

When Jefferson saw the food spread out, he rubbed his hands together greedily. “Leo, do you remember when we went down to Genua to celebrate Fat Lunchtime?”

“Of course, love.” With one hand, Leona picked up three of the tiny sausages on skewers. “We had a grand time, but you said the food was disappointing.”

“It was,” her husband agreed. “Because it was just a pale reflection of these!” He held up a handled glass bowl that was full of pastries covered in white powder. “The Dark One and I first discovered these delights while we were running an errand for the Chef-Queen of Maldonia.”

Belle went over to the cupboard in the cabinet to get pull out the drink tray. Behind her, she could hear Jefferson making exaggerated moans as he ate half the pastry in one bite.

“Leo, you have to try this!” he said with his mouth full. The white powder had dusted over his printed orange shirt. Leona batted at the powder while Jefferson pushed the other half of the pastry toward her. “Try it!”

“What is it?” Leona laughed. “What’s it called?”

“A beignet. It’s like nothing in this world or most others.”

As Belle approached them with the tray, Leona took a dainty bite out of her husband’s hands.

Immediately, the woman’s eyes went wide. “It’s hot!” she said. “It’s sweet!” She chewed. “It’s amazing!” Leona’s face melted into pure bliss.

“I know!” Jefferson beamed at his wife. “It’s just fried dough in powdered sugar, but it’s so easy to get wrong that it will change your life when you have it done right!”

“Let me have another one.”

“Excuse me?” Belle came between them with the tray.

She offered two cups to the two guests. One was made of clay and was no bigger than a thimble. The dark amber liquid inside smelled faintly of apples and intensely of alcohol. The other cup was a lavender porcelain teacup and saucer. The drink was steaming, but the aroma wafting out smelled much earthier than any tea Belle had ever known.

“Oh, thanks very much.” Jefferson smiled broadly at the teacup, as if he knew exactly what was inside it.

Leona took the thimble cup and quaffed the contents in a single swig. Her eyes watered but her expression was that of pained delight. She pounded the flat of her palm against the wooden tabletop as she swallowed.

“Jefferson,” Leona gripped her husband by the arm. “I need you to promise me something.”

Jefferson held his cup and saucer in his free hand and carefully blew on it. “Anything, my love.”

“Promise me, you’ll *never* let Mum know that her scumble is now only the *second* best I’ve ever had
Jefferson threw his head back and laughed. “You should see if that cupboard makes brandy better than your mother’s too.”

“I would never!” Leona cried. “To be bested by a little wooden box at scumble and brandy? It would break her heart!”

The couple laughed together and Belle went out to see Rumple again. They seemed like lovely people, not monsters at all.

It did make her heart heavy to see a man and a woman so obviously in love with each other, to see them delight in each other’s company and be utterly comfortable together. She would never have that, not so explicitly.

No one would ever call her “my love.”

Rumpelstiltskin was still standing on the landing outside the foyer, his hands behind his back. He looked over at her as she approached.

“Are they settled in?”

Belle nodded. If she had a voice, she would have told him how impressed they both had been with his refreshments. She would have to remember to tell him when he took her collar off after the party.

“Jefferson is an old friend,” Rumple said softly. “We’ve been on dozens of adventures together, off and on, over the years. But he has a family now, so I’ve seen less and less of him.”

From what Jefferson had said, that had been Rumple’s choice, not his. But perhaps that wasn’t for her to mention. Either way, she couldn’t now. All Belle could do was stand close to him and rub her hand along his golden brocade coat. The next time she was permitted a question, she would ask about Jefferson. She wanted to know about the adventures they had gone on, and how they had become so close, and what, exactly, that closeness involved.

A shadow appeared over the moon and Rumpelstiltskin stepped away from Belle. As the shadow came closer, it appeared to be the shape of a man. He was tall and wearing dark robes, holding a staff and standing on a--Belle squinted--a carpet?

The carpet flew over the gates, through the courtyard, and stopped in front of Rumpelstiltskin on the landing. The man disembarked and the carpet rolled itself up and placed itself into a corner in the foyer.

This new guest stood like someone of great importance. The staff in his hand was made of bronze, shaped like the head of a hissing snake. He wore a black turban on his head and had a large red and blue bird perched on his shoulder.

“Belle, may I present Jafar, Grand Vizier to the Sultan of Agrabah.”

“Soon to be the sultan’s son-in-law,” Jafar bowed with an oily smile. “And shortly after that, the sultan.”

Rumple cocked his head to the side. “So you are to wed the little princess then? I’m sure she’s happy to hear that.”

“What does it matter how that shrew feels about it? When her father issues a command, she must
obey.” His eyes roved over Belle while he kept talking to Rumpelstiltskin. “Women are only ever truly happy when they’re being obedient to their men, don’t you find?”

“In my experience, it depends on the woman,” Rumple said evenly. “And on the man.”

“Aw-waak!” Suddenly, the bird on Jafar’s shoulder made a noise that sounded like human speech. “Too cold!”

Belle blinked, and felt her mouth open. Did that animal just speak? How was that possible? Was it magical? Had it been a person at one time, transformed into a bird? Were such creatures common in Jafar’s kingdom?

Rumple saw her expression. “So you still have that parrot, then?” He emphasized the word slightly, just enough that Belle knew he was doing it on purpose. So that creature was called a parrot. She would have to ask Rumple about that too, when she got her voice back.

“Oh, yes,” Jafar said with a throaty chuckle. “Iago can be a dreadful nuisance at times, but no one else in my confidence has more cunning and devious ideas.”

“Feed me!” the parrot said, as if participating in the conversation.

Belle couldn’t stop staring at this animal, and she couldn’t help the feeling that it was looking back at her with understanding. Its eyes were yellow, the black pupils moving and regarding her in a manner unlike any other bird she’d ever seen.

It had an intelligence, she thought. It looked at her like it knew she was a whore, and knew what whoring meant. Belle’s stomach roiled as the parrot looked at her. She was an object of lust to this animal as much as she was to any of the people here tonight.

“Belle,” Rumple’s voice cut through her thoughts, “why don’t you take Jafar and his companion inside with the other guests?”

“Thank you,” she nodded, blinking. This was silly, she thought. She had known what it would mean to be presented as Rumpelstiltskin’s thing, his whore, his pleasure-slave. That was the whole point of this party, for him to show her off and drive all of his friends wild with jealousy. Of course they would want her. It should be a compliment that anything with eyes looked at her with desire.

But knowing the logic of it was entirely different from feeling those strange and lustful eyes upon her as she moved.

When she turned around the parrot whistled. “Tailfeathers!” it said. Then it whistled again and made chirping sounds all the way into the foyer. Somehow, by some creeping feeling at the base of her neck, Belle knew that the noises the animal was making were obscene.

“Hush, Iago,” Jafar snapped the creature’s beak shut between his thin fingers. He stopped her before she could take them from the foyer to the dining room. He wrapped a bony hand around her bare arm and held her still. His fingers rubbed at her skin, slowly sliding down her arm and stopping at the cuff on her wrist.

With surprising strength, Jafar pulled her hand up to him so that he might examine the cuff more closely. Belle’s body followed her wrist, and she almost tripped over her heels and her long skirt. She almost fell into the arms of this man, this towering stranger who smiled like poison.

“My apologies for the insult to your lovely ears. Iago is a vile animal with base instincts. But clearly you are a creature of more refinement.”
“Thank you?” Belle took a step backwards, gently pulling her hand out of his grasp.

“In my kingdom,” he went on, “a jewel such as yourself would adorn a sultan’s crown. Perhaps not as a queen, but you would certainly be the favorite in a harem.”

“Excuse me,” Belle made herself smile and nearly bolted for the dining room. Jafar stalked behind her, unruffled. “And with your obvious aptitude for punishment… Well, I know many men in Agrabah who would give me everything they possessed just to spend an hour with you in a dungeon.”

“Right away!” Belle loudly announced her presence and her intention as soon as she opened the doors.

But Jafar didn’t let her take another step into the dining room. He grabbed her wrist again, snaking his gnarled fingers around one of her cuffs.

“It’s these, isn’t it?” he hissed. “These are what bind you to the Dark One, what make you his slave instead of mine.”

“Hey there!” Jefferson bounded over to them, almost forcing his body directly between Belle and Jafar. “You look like an interesting person! My name is Jefferson, pleasure to meet you!” He stuck out his hand in greeting.

Jafar shook Jefferson’s hand like he had been offered a dead fish. “Ecstatic to make your acquaintance.”

Jefferson stayed where he was and Belle snuck away to the cupboard. On her way, she passed Leona, who was standing beside the enchanted instruments.

“You alright?” she spoke softly enough that the men couldn’t hear.

Belle took a deep breath, and then she nodded. “Thank you,” she said.

Leona winked at her. “Didn’t look like old bird-and-bedsheets there knew this wasn’t that kind of a party.”

Belle snickered and the laughter felt like a cool breeze on a stifling day.

The cupboard yielded a bowl of fresh fruit cut up into small pieces, and a small cup full of something steaming and black. Belle took another breath before she went back to Jafar.

Jefferson was still pulling the vizier into conversation. “Just where did you say you were from?”

“Oh, much farther than you’ve travelled, I’m sure.” He reached out to Belle as she served, but Jefferson interrupted the motion by clapping the other man on the back.

“Try me!” he laughed. “I promise you, I’ve been almost everywhere!”

Jefferson knew what he was doing, Belle thought. He was protecting her, with Leona as his partner. When she got the chance, she would have to tell Rumple what very good friends they had.

She slipped away from the dining room and back outside to wait with Rumple.

When he saw her face, his brow furrowed. “Something happened. Are you alright?”
Belle nodded and stood beside him. “Thank you,” she said. She didn’t care about the cold anymore. If she froze to death it would be fine, as long as she could do it at his side.

Rumple pressed her close to him, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “Do you want to stop?”

Belle shook her head against his high collar, relishing the warmth of him.

He rubbed her shoulder. “Perhaps this was a foolish notion. But I still say you can handle it. Just kiss my boots if you need it all to go away.”

Belle nodded into his coat, wanting to nod into his skin, wanting them to be naked together in a bed, warm and happy and alone. She wanted to talk to him, to use her own words instead of smiles and gestures and meaningless phrases. He was right next to her and she missed him so much.

But she didn’t want the party to stop. She didn’t want to give up so easily, to put an end to everybody’s good time. She was stronger than that, she knew she was. There was nothing she couldn’t handle tonight, so long as everything ended with her in Rumpelstiltskin’s arms.

Presently, there was a strange rumbling sound coming from the avenue leading to the castle. Through the darkness, Belle saw two lights, brighter than the rising moon. The lights were above the ground and at the same level, like the eyes of a giant animal, and they were getting closer.

“Oh.” Rumple said flatly. “Well, there’s no way to explain what you’re about to see, so just think of it as a white metal monster, or a giant horse with no true life in it.”

It certainly sounded like a monster. The rumbling grew louder as the lights grew brighter and there were a few other sounds that almost sounded like the honking of a goose, but longer and angrier.

Abruptly, the noises stopped and the lights dimmed. A door opened in the side of the white metal and a woman stepped out. In the near-darkness, Belle could only make out hair that was black on one side and white on the other.

“Hello, darling!” the woman called up from the avenue. “We’ll be right up!”

“‘We’ she says,” Rumple muttered. “I wonder which paramour she brought with her this time.”

Two women came up the steps. The one who had greeted them raced up the stairs, lifting the hem of her skirt up to reveal shoes very much like the ones Belle wore. Her shoes were colored the bright red to match her gloves and the inside of her white fur coat. The woman moved with impressive speed. How could she run in such shoes?

The other woman walked more slowly, as though she had to ponder each step before she took it. She kept her eyes on the ground but didn’t lift up her green dress.

“Darling!” The pale woman greeted Rumpelstiltskin with a kissing motion over each of his shoulders. “It has been ages! Where the hell have you been hiding?”

“Here, mostly,” he said flatly. “Cruella, let me introduce you to Belle.”

The woman’s face was heavy with cosmetics. Her painted lips made a perfect scarlett O when she looked at Belle. She held up a long pipe in a red-gloved hand and brought it to her mouth.

“Well!” the woman said as she exhaled smoke. “Yes, I can see why anyone would want to stay sequestered with a little morsel like this.”
Rumple didn’t respond to that. “Belle, this is Cruella de Vil, of the House of de Vil.”

Belle gave Cruella de Vil a polite smile. She seemed such a volatile person, it was hard to know how to react to her.

Cruella grinned and called down to her companion. “Ursula, come get a look at this gel! She’s so beautiful I’m about to be sick!” It took Belle a moment to understand the odd way this woman said the word girl.

The other woman reached the top of the stairs and Belle saw why she’d had so much trouble. She had thought that the woman was wearing a green dress, but now she saw that only the bodice was made of green cloth. The woman wore no skirt, because she had no legs. Her lower half was a bright green cluster of wriggling tentacles. She had to propel herself on them to move forward.

“This is Ursula,” Rumple said, “the Sea-Witch. Ursula, this is Belle.”

Belle tried not to stare at the Sea-Witch, even as her mind reeled. So she was a water creature! How agonizing must it be for her to live on land! Did she do it all the time or had she only come out of the ocean for this party? Belle was so engrossed in her thoughts, she almost didn’t feel something cold and wet slide across her cheek.

It was a tentacle, caressing her face as dextrously as a hand. Belle gulped, but refused to let herself scream or fight against the bizarre sensation.

Ursula had brown skin and yellow hair. She wore a green crown that held her hair back, but still let it cascade down her shoulders. Her smile was wide and knowing, with very white teeth.

“She is exquisite,” her voice was deep and musical. She turned her gaze to the other woman. “But I’d rather go home with you.”

Cruella preened, wrapping her white fur coat closely around her body. “Darling!”

“So the two of you are back together,” Rumple said. “Is it for good this time?”

The Sea-Witch answered with a laugh, “Never for good, but it will be forever.” She took Cruella by the hand and kissed her gloved knuckles. “At least, I want it to be.”

With her free hand, Cruella caressed Ursula’s cheek. “You just need to stop leaving me alone for days at a time. I get terribly lonely, and bored and I… seek out company. It’s only because I miss you!”

Ursula chuckled and wrapped her arm around the other woman’s waist. “If you say so, love.”

Love again, Belle thought. So many people had love tonight. Even people Rumpelstiltskin called monsters. These women stood together, their foreheads touching, each of them smiling a smile meant only for the other. Looking at them hurt Belle in a way she couldn’t describe.

“But look at this creature!” Cruella broke away to gesture at Belle. “Isn’t she the perfect little pet! Look at her collar!” She looked at Rumple. “Oh, but she is a good girl, isn’t she? I’m sure you like to make her roll over and beg!” The last word was almost a growl, playful and suggestive.

Rumple only smiled politely. “Why don’t you ladies go inside for some refreshment?”

In the dining room, the other three guests were over by the enchanted instruments. It seemed that Jefferson and Leona had gotten the instruments to change their tune, and now the couple was trying
to teach Jafar and his parrot a song about hedgehogs. Their attention kept Jafar too occupied to give Belle any trouble.

Belle served Cruella de Vil a clear liquid in a glass shaped like an upside-down cone on a very long stem. At the bottom of the glass, there was an olive on a skewer.

“Oh my God!” Cruella’s eyes were teary as she took the glass by the stem. She held it up and looked at the clear fluid as though it were the elixir of life. “Gin!”

Ursula was given a two-handled bowl that was covered with seashells. She didn’t drink the contents, but slowly poured them over her body like she was rinsing off after a bath. The Sea-Witch sighed contentedly, her tentacles reaching out to catch any errant drops of moisture.

“Coo-ee!” Leona called over to the newcomers. “Come and join us! We’ll all be singing after another round or three and it’s better if you know some of the words ahead of time.”

Cruella and Ursula exchanged a look. Belle imagined a silent conversation between them, debating the merits of joining in on the revelry or staying outside the circle of merriment. After a moment, the two women walked hand in hand over to the others.

“I have been known to enjoy a pretty voice,” Ursula said.

“And when we’ve all learned your song, I’ve got one to teach you all.” Cruella de Vil grinned saucily. “It’s got my name in it.”

“Mind serving us another round, Belle?” Jefferson asked.

“Right away,” Belle said, her smile not so false as usual. Jefferson had become a balm to her, a life raft while she swam through a treacherous ocean.

Belle served them all. As she walked among Rumple’s friends, there were subtle touches placed on her body, from everyone but Jefferson and Leona. Belle tried to ignore the sensations. The touches were nothing galling, no assault on her body. If she asked any of the guests, they would say that it was an accident—a brush across her back, a finger against her palm, a soft press of a body against her body. It was nothing, she told herself. Nothing worse than she had expected.

She went outside.

Rumple had his eyes on the night sky, scanning it across the horizon. He stopped when he heard the clacking of Belle’s shoes. “How are you holding up, little one?”

“Excuse me,” Belle said, beleaguered. The party had only begun and already she would have happily said good night to every new person she had met today.

“You know how to end it if you need to.” His face was sympathetic. Belle wondered if he knew what she felt. She wanted the party to be over, but had no desire to be the one to end it. “Is everyone alright in there?”

“Right away,” she nodded. The phrases made no sense, but Rumple understood.

“Good. We can lock them all in and go traveling.”

Belle snorted out a giggle and for a moment everything felt normal again.

Rumple held her by her arms. “I know this is a trial, my sweet. But you are doing so well!
Everything we set out to accomplish by planning this party is already done! I promise you, it will be smooth sailing from here on out.”

Belle nodded. “Right away.”

“I think everyone who is coming is here. Are you ready to go in?”

She didn’t speak, but held up one finger as an answer.

“One thing first? What is it?”

Belle threw her arms around him and pressed her body into his. Of all the touches she had received that night, this was the only one she craved.

Rumple stumbled back a little, but quickly returned the embrace. He held her and for a moment they breathed the same air and there was no one else in the world except for them.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she answered.

Slowly, they broke apart and Rumpelstiltskin led her into the dining room, closing the doors behind them. She brought him a goblet of gold-colored wine from the cupboard--and another round for everyone else--and they allowed the chatter and revelry to keep them separated. He sat on the table and struck up a conversation with Leona. Belle stood by the cabinet, ready to serve.

The company had broken away from the enchanted instruments and fractured into hubs of conversation. Jafar and Ursula seemed to be comparing types of magic. Leona and Rumple were talking about Jefferson. And Jefferson was talking to Cruella. She was describing a very specific leather item that was far beyond the skill of any leatherworkers she could commission.

“No, I know where to procure something like that,” Jefferson said between bites of a beignet. They were standing by the glass cabinets, close enough that Belle could hear the entirety of their conversation. “There’s a man by the name of Tuttle Scrope in Ankh-Morpork who specializes in such items. If you have your measurements handy, we’ll actually be going that way after the party. I could bring you back a quote, including my finder’s fee.”

“Darling, that would be simply divine!” Cruella smiled. “My sweet Ursula seems to think she has cause to doubt me and I want to show her that I’m faithful as dog to her!”

“Understandable. Why do you think my wife and I wear these?” He flicked at his leather collar with his thumb. “Now, if you happen to have gold on you, I can--”

The doors slammed open and everyone went silent.

Two women entered the room, both of them beautiful and magnificent. One was tall and sleek, robed in black and purple with a horned headdress over curly blonde hair. The other was shorter, but no less grand. Her black gown was wide and adorned with jewels--blood red rubies and onyx and diamonds. When she spoke, her voice was low and mocking:

“Sorry we’re late.”

Chapter End Notes
"Scumble" is a highly alcoholic beverage made from (mostly) apples. The best (non-magic) scumble is made by Mrs. Gytha "Nanny" Ogg of the Ramtops region of the Discworld, as documented by the late Sir Terry Pratchett. It should be noted that scumble is not suitable for those unaccustomed to vast amounts of extremely hard liquor, and even for those with a high tolerance roaring drunkenness is inevitable. Singing certain bawdy songs about hedgehogs is also, apparently, an unavoidable side effect of scumble consumption.

Also, there are three different human actors who have played Jafar in various adaptations and the cartoon surpasses them all in every way.
The Queens

Chapter Summary

Belle meets Rumple's most dangerous guests

Belle saw the two latecomers from her place by the cabinet. The women stayed in the doors to the dining room as though they were posing for a portrait. The arch of the doorway framed them as they stood side by side, hands joined at the level of their heads in a show of unity.

They were queens, Belle knew it instinctively. If, somehow, they were not queens of earthly kingdoms, then at least these two women were equal to any royalty in terms of power and wealth and beauty. From across the room, Belle could feel the confidence wafting off of them, a self-possession that could only have come from lifetimes of being obeyed without question.

Belle could only imagine what they did to people who did not obey without question.

The women were beautiful, for all that they were fearsome as well. Both of them were robed in black gowns that sparkled with dark jewels. The blonde woman was tall and sleek, her clothes accented with amethysts, purple ribbons adorning the horns of her headdress.

The other woman had black hair, done up into an elaborate style and decorated with garnets and rubies as red as blood. Her gown was wide and stately, the black velvet studded with onyx and trimmed with red silk. The silver and diamond necklace at her throat was almost large enough to distract from the cleavage pushing up from her bodice.

Individually, each woman was the envy of any goddess. But together, with their powers united, they gave the impression of being completely unstoppable.

None of the other guests moved. Belle saw Jafar staring at the queens, not moving even as his hand was halfway to his mouth with an olive in his fingers. The only sound in the dining room was the playing of the enchanted instruments.

They had certainly made an entrance.

Finally, Rumpesitskin hopped off the table where he had been sitting to converse with Jefferson’s wife. He sauntered over to them, arms wide in greeting.

“Late again, Regina? Haven’t you heard that punctuality is the virtue of princes?”

The dark-haired woman broke her pose to laugh. It was a rich, throaty sound that carried across the room. “Good thing I’m not a prince then.”

“I think so,” the blonde woman smirked to Regina as though they were sharing a secret joke.

Rumple turned to the blonde woman. “So, Maleficent, it seems you truly are the Mistress of All Evil, hmm?”
The blonde woman giggled and kissed Regina’s knuckles, their fingers still entwined. Unlike Regina’s disdainful mockery, Maleficent’s laugh seemed to be borne of genuine delight. “There is nothing else I’d rather be.”

One by one, the other guests turned their attention away from the queens. Leona Ogg took a platter of breaded oysters from the table and brought them over to Jefferson and Cruella. Jafar finally managed to eat his olive and wiped his mouth with a napkin before slinking towards the queens. Ursula rolled her eyes at him and went to pull Cruella away from Jefferson. Jafar’s parrot dunked its head into a neglected drink. All over the room, conversations began again.

As the noise increased, Belle didn’t hear Rumpelstiltskin give her an order. But the cuffs pulled at her wrists anyway, making her open the magical cupboard and pull out the silver tray for drinks.

Hurrying to keep up with the cuffs, Belle nearly tipped over in her shoes before she reached Rumple, Regina and Maleficent. She managed to keep hold of the tray and didn’t spill a drop. The cuffs controlled her hands, they wouldn’t let her embarrass herself unless Rumple wanted her to. But it still wasn’t easy to keep her composure when she was teetering like a deer on ice.

Regina looked at her struggle with one eyebrow raised. “Clumsy thing, isn’t she?”

_I’m not clumsy, it’s just these shoes_, Belle wanted to say. But the ruby and gold collar Rumple had given her made the words come out as nothing more than, “Excuse me.”

She had never thought it possible to hate words until she had been forced to say the same ones over and over while meaning something completely different.

Belle offered the tray to the queens. Up close, they were even more magnificent. Both their faces were painted expertly with cosmetics. The red in Regina’s cheeks was subtle, especially compared to her kohl-rimmed eyes and crimson painted lips. Maleficent had her eyes shadowed in lavender, which brought out their supernatural green. Though captivated, Belle lowered her gaze. It was rude to stare.

Regina took a silver goblet full of dark red wine. Maleficent drank a black liquid from a purple flower, a lilly. As far as Belle could tell, it was a living flower and not just a cleverly-made glass. What was that drink? What manner of creature was Maleficent?

“That will be all, dearie,” Rumple said briskly when she was done. “You may run along.”

Belle blinked. Dearie? He hadn’t called her that in months. What did it mean that he was using that term now? She darted a glance at him. His face revealed nothing, which was revealing enough.

“Don’t make her go, Rumple!” Maleficent pouted. Belle’s stomach dropped to hear this woman use her nickname for him. “Your thing is so pretty! I want to see more of her.”

“Much more,” Regina grinned over her goblet.

Jafar had been lurking near them, and now he took this opportunity to break into the conversation. “May I add my voice to that request? The girl is absolutely --”

“Stand down, snake .” Maleficent cut him off. “The dragons are talking.” Her green eyes brightened as she commanded him, flaring up like a fire.

Jafar straightened up and opened his mouth, but then seemed to reconsider. He gave the queens a shallow bow and walked away from them all.
That was the second time that one of Rumple’s friends had gotten in between Belle and Jafar, but this time it was no comfort. At the beginning of the party, Jefferson had placed himself as an obstacle to Jafar’s lechery, leaving Belle to go about her business. This time, it seemed as though Maleficent and Regina were scaring him away so they could keep Belle to themselves. They were nothing more than wolves snapping at a dog to keep it away from their prey.

Belle was suddenly aware of her bare stomach, of the gold-colored wax that covered only the smallest part of her breasts, of the threads that hung in arcs from her nipples and swung tantalizingly when she walked. She held the empty tray in flat front of her, as through it would be able to hide her body.

But Rumple was here, Belle reminded herself. As subtly as she could, she moved herself closer to him. He wouldn’t let anyone hurt her at the party. He had promised it. And he told her he would end it all in a moment, if she needed to. All she had to do was kiss his boots.

She took a breath. She would be alright. Rumple was here, and everything was fine.

Regina took another swallow from her goblet. “So what’s your name, pretty one? Margie?” she smirked. “Verna?”

“Are you always so curious about the help, Regina?” Rumple’s voice was clipped. “Surely a queen has more interesting matters to dwell on.”

Maleficent answered. “Rumple, there is nothing more interesting than coming to this place and seeing a girl dressed like that. Can you blame us for asking questions?”

“And it’s obvious what kind of help she is to you,” Regina sneered. “The only mystery is what the little toy’s name is.”

Rumple didn’t move as the two women talked. Even his hands didn’t perform their usual gestures, but held still in front of him. Belle saw it as the posture of a man bound at the wrists, forced to walk to an unpleasant destination.

“Her name is Belle,” he said after a moment. His voice was soft, but not gentle. He sounded hoarse and raspy to Belle’s ears, as though he were in pain.

“Belle,” Regina said the word slowly, savoring it on her tongue. “How appropriate.”

“She is beautiful,” Maleficent agreed.

“Thank you,” Belle said firmly. For the first time that night, her voice was strong and steady. She scowled at these women, looking them in the eyes and no longer cowering behind her tray.

Whatever fear she had felt in the presence of these evil queens wasn’t there anymore. It had been replaced by a sharp resentment that would turn to rage with just a little more provocation. They were hurting Rumple, and that was enough to make Belle hate them forever.

Regina laughed and twisted her hand to press the backs of her knuckles against Belle’s cheek. “Oh, and she has a little spirit, too. How fun! It’s always so invigorating to have a victim fight back, don’t you think?”

Rumple didn’t answer the queen but addressed Belle without looking at her. “Jefferson is waving an empty cup around, dearie. Go and give him another drink.”

“Right away,” she said through clenched teeth. As the cuffs pulled her to the cabinet, Belle glared at
them over her shoulder. How could Rumple send her away? How could she leave him alone with those evil women?

As she approached Jefferson, she saw that he had, in fact, poured the contents of his teacup into a nearby vase. Leona had taken the easier way to quickly empty her drink, and was wiping drops of liquor off her chin as Belle approached.

“Are you alright?” Jefferson asked her. “Regina and her friend were getting awfully personal over there.”

“Who do they think they are?” Leona asked, her head bobbing with tipsy indignation. “Highfalutin nobls!”

“I’ve met Queen Regina before.” Jefferson said. His flat tone told Belle all she needed to know about how pleasant an encounter that had been. “She’s pretty good at that magic thing. And, if rumors are correct, that getting-away-with-murder thing.”

Leona scoffed. “Royalty, magic, or whatever, she’d look better with a black eye!”

“Oh, that’s a bad idea.” Hurriedly, Jefferson directed his wife over to the cabinet. “Let’s see if Belle can get this thing to switch you over to beer instead of scumble, is that alright?”

Leona took a moment to consider his offer. With her eyes closed, she nodded. “Yeah, yes. Better slow down before I start acting too much like my mother.”

“Your mother is a fearless woman, but even she would know not to make herself a target to people like that. Beer will help you keep a level head, my love. Belle, can you help us out?”

Belle didn’t know how to tell them that the magic cabinet was entirely beyond her control. All she ever did was put in an empty tray and pull out a full one. It produced whatever was needed.

But she would rather spend the rest of the evening exploring the workings of a magical box with Jefferson and Leona than spend one more second in the presence of people like Jafar and the queens. So when Belle pulled out a tray with another teacup and a tankard of frothy beer it was, honestly, a bit of a disappointment.

“Yeah, that’s the stuff,” Jefferson said as he took the tankard and handed it to his wife. “Thanks to Belle, you might be able to avoid a hangover tomorrow morning.”

Leona grinned and took a swig. “But don’t think this will stop me from having a good time tonight, my man.”

“Leo, my love, I know a party without everyone getting drunk enough to sing The Hedgehog Song is no party at all. I would never deny you that.” He kissed her on her round cheek and Leona flushed pink as she giggled.

Belle felt a dull ache in her chest. It was so hard to see this couple together, to see them love each other and care for each other, even in front of other people. Jefferson and Leona’s marriage was a sharp reminder of what Belle would never have.

“Excuse me,” she said quietly as she moved to leave them.

“Hey, make sure everyone has a full drink, would you?” Jefferson said. “I want to make a toast.”

“Right away,” Belle nodded.
This time, the tray held a glass for every one of Rumple’s guests. Belle looked around the dining room and devised a strategy.

She went to Jafar first. It was always best to do unpleasant tasks as soon as possible, and this way she would have a legitimate excuse to run away if she needed to.

“Ah!” he said at her approach. He was standing in front of the fireplace, accompanied by no one but his parrot. “The precious pearl returns!”

Belle forced herself to smile and held out the tray. Perhaps he would simply take his small cup of steaming dark liquid and let her go. But instead, he kept talking.

“Do you know about your pearl, my dear?” He leaned over her, his beady eyes peering into the gap between the golden belt and her skin. “Have you ever touched that most precious, most lovely part of yourself? That sweet, round bud that produces such exquisite pleasure?”

He reached out to her, and his hand seemed to be its own animal--some long, limp, multi-armed abomination. She stepped away from it, but he kept talking. “Have you ever had a man touch you there? A real man, mind you, not the creature that has enslaved you.”

Still smiling, Belle felt bile rise up into her throat. Carefully, she balanced the tray on one hand and took Jafar’s cup with the other. She set the cup on the mantle, took the tray in both hands, and backed away slowly.

“Excuse me,” she said. She kept the smile on her face even as she wanted to claw off her own skin.

Delivering drinks to Ursula and Cruella was a delight in comparison. Cruella gave her a dazzling smile when she saw her approach.

“There’s my gin! My nectar of the gods!” She took her long-stemmed glass and sipped slowly of the clear liquid. Sighing, she let her fur coat slink back off her shoulders as she stretched her head back and closed her eyes. “Pure ambrosia!”

Belle was so caught up in watching Cruella’s ecstatic enjoyment of her beverage that she almost didn’t notice the tentacle that slithered up to take a seashell-covered goblet off the tray. Ursula caught her gaze and winked at her.

“When my beloved enjoys something, she enjoys it with her whole being.”

Cruella opened her eyes and gazed longingly at the other woman. “That’s how it is when I enjoy you, my darling.”

“I know.” Ursula wrapped her tentacles around Cruella’s skinny body and brought her in for a kiss. Even with her mouth occupied, Cruella squealed with delight.

“Excuse me,” Belle said, turning her back on yet another loving couple.

She couldn’t help but wonder how the occupants of this room represented the population at large. Was the whole world like this? Was every kingdom in every land filled with either people who loved each other and were happy together, or else were so twisted by the lack of love that they sought power and cruelty instead?

Belle knew that wasn’t true. She knew the vastness of human experience, knew that there were other destinies besides wanting a Jefferson and fearing a Jafar. There were marriages that had no love, and loves that had no marriage. It was fine not to have anyone love her. She would never have loved
Gaston, but she could have found happiness in life as his wife. What rule made it that romantic love was the only goal worth striving for? It was silly, she told herself. She didn’t need it.

All she needed was Rumple.

He was still entertaining the queens. It seemed they were talking politics, or possibly murder. Belle knew how closely related those two things could be.

As Belle approached, Maleficent was speaking: “It would be the easiest thing in the world to transfer my sleeping curse onto another object.”

“So you can finally return that spindle you borrowed from me ninety-eight years ago?” Rumple quipped. He seemed in better spirits than he had been before. Or perhaps now it was just easier for him to lie.

Playfully, Maleficent tapped him on the shoulder. “Ninety-seven years, Rumple! I should know, I visit my princess every year on her birthday. But isn’t it just perfect that Regina and I will vanquish our enemies with the exact same spell?”

“And you still have the curse I gave you for safekeeping?” He neatly avoided answering her question.

“The one only a desperate fool would ever dare use? Yes, it’s safe and sound.”

“Good,” Rumple said, his eyes flickering to Regina.

Belle stepped forward. “Excuse me?”

The queens took the same drinks she’d given them before. For Rumple, the cabinet had changed the goblet of gold-colored wine for a smaller cup of dark liquor.

With the tray empty, Belle stood by Rumple’s side and waited for more orders. It would be better to be away from the queens, but it would be worse to be away from him.

Regina opened her red-painted mouth, but before she could speak a loud clanging noise filled the hall.

Jefferson stood on the table, in the midst of all the food, and banged two empty pewter platters together to get everyone’s attention. They all turned to look at him.

“Hello, everyone!” he said, his voice lively and animated. “I won’t take too much of your time, I just want to propose a toast!”

“I accept your proposal!” Leona called out from the crowd, laughing at her own joke.

“You already did, Leo,” Jefferson chuckled and then returned to business. He raised his teacup and saucer in one hand. “Firstly, and most rhymingly, a toast to our host!” He gestured to Rumple and grandly doffed his hat. “Dark One, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for this invitation to your home and this opportunity for all of us to be together–both the devilish,” he stretched out his hand to indicate his audience, “and the devilishly handsome.” Jefferson put his hat over his heart and bowed his head in theatrical modesty.

Belle wasn’t surprised to hear one whistle from the crowd at the mention of Jefferson’s good looks. But she was surprised by the second one. Looking around, Belle saw Cruella deVil take two fingers out of her mouth and smile.
The company clapped and drank enthusiastically. Jefferson remained on the table.

“And before I do us all a favor and stop talking--”

“Too late!”

“Thank you, Leo. As long as I have your attention, I would be severely remiss if I did not toast my wife.” He held up his cup, replacing showmanship for sincerity. “Leona Ogg, you’ve made me the happiest man alive. In every world and every realm, I am yours until death.”

Jefferson hopped off the table and his wife ran up to kiss him. As they kissed, he wrapped his arms around her and dipped her down while everyone clapped.

“To young love!” Cruella cried out, and then took another drink.

“To enduring fidelity!” Ursula offered.

“To the increase of our power!” Jafar lifted his cup.

“To happiness for all of us!” Maleficent joined in.

“May we all get what we deserve!” Regina said.

Next to her, Belle heard Rumpelstiltskin mutter: “Finally, something I can drink to.” He took a swig of his amber-colored drink, bitterness writ plainly across his face.

Belle tried to reach out to him, but he brushed past her to go sit in his armchair by the fireplace.

Through all of this, Jefferson and Leona were still kissing. When they finally released each other, Leona laughed and stumbled backwards. Jefferson looked no less intoxicated.

“Ooo-wee!” Leona exclaimed. “That just makes me want to start singin’! Anybody else?” She looked over to Cruella and Ursula. “C’mon, we already taught you the words! We can even start simple, with ‘A Wizard’s Staff Has a Knob on the End.’ That’s a fun one!”

After a moment of reluctance and subsequent cajoling, half the party conveined around the enchanted instruments to sing a rousing chorus about the famed length, hardness, and knob-on-the-endness of the proverbial wizard’s staff.

For a moment, Belle watched them all. It didn’t look like anyone would need another drink for a little while. Slowly, she began to step backwards, hoping no one would notice her leaving them all to go to Rumple. He wasn’t enjoying the party any more than she was, and perhaps they could give each other some small comfort to tide them over until it was time for everyone else to leave.

“Where are you going?” A woman’s voice purred behind her.

Despite her best intentions of bravery, Belle jumped at Regina’s words. Her heart pounded as she turned around and answered, “Excuse me.”

“No, I do not excuse you,” Regina said imperiously. “Stay here and let’s chat.”

Maleficent slinked up behind Belle. The two women edged her closer to the wall, blocking off any easy escape route. Rumple was turned away from her. Everyone else--even Jafar, even the parrot--was over by the instruments, distracted by their own singing.

Belle swallowed. She understood, now, why Rumple had put her in this collar. Any chat they would
Mustered all her courage, Belle gave the queens an artificial smile. “Right away.”

“Is your name really Belle?” Regina started. “Rumple doesn’t usually lie outright, but you might be a special exception.”

“Excuse me,” Belle shrugged, raising her arms in a show of helplessness.

She could have nodded. With someone else, might have. But there was a satisfaction in having no choice but to obfuscate and frustrate these women.

Regina’s expression soured. “What kind of answer is that?”

Belle shrugged again. “Thank you?”

“Let me try,” Maleficent bent down to look Belle in the eye. Her voice was bright and cloyingly sweet. “Is something wrong with you, dear? Are you stupid? Is that why you can’t talk?”

Belle made her smile just as sweet as Maleficent’s, her tone just as patronizing. “Right away, thank you.”

“No, this is magic,” Regina said darkly. She continued her interrogation. “Is it a spell that binds you?” She squinted at Belle’s face. “Does Rumple have you enchanted to only say certain words?”

Belle looked the queen steadily in the eye, her voice flat and uninterested. She was done playing this game. “Thank you, excuse me.”

Pushing herself off the wall, Belle moved to go back to the cabinet, but Regina grabbed her arm. Her sharp fingernails, painted in black lacquer, almost looked like Rumple’s as they dug into Belle’s arm.

“Who do you think you are?” Regina hissed. “You think you can say no to us about anything?”

Belle stared into the queen’s dark eyes. When she spoke, she made sure to enunciate every syllable. “Ex. Cuse. Me.”

She tried to pull away, but Regina’s grip was strong.

“Is it the collar?” She didn’t wait for Belle to answer. “Is that the source of his power over you?” Regina pulled Belle closer and examined her neck. Belle felt her hot breath against her skin. “It’s the ruby,” she announced. “I can feel the magic coming off it.” Her expression turned even darker. “What happens if we remove it, hmm?” She grinned and raised her hand to Belle’s neck. “Let’s find out.”

Regina fiddled with the clasp as Maleficent stood by, watching out for anything that would interrupt them. Immobilized by panic, Belle was more surprised than anyone when her hand rose to slap Regina away.

It wasn’t a hard slap. The impact made so little noise that the singers didn’t even pause. Belle wasn’t even sure what part of Regina her hand had hit. All she knew was that it worked. In her surprise, Regina let go of Belle’s arm and Belle was able to stagger back away from them.

Both women wore the same expression of shock and incredulity that Belle knew was on her face. She had been trying to be brave, but that was just reckless. How had she done it? How had she dared assault someone who was both royalty and a guest? Even Belle didn’t understand it until she looked at her still-open hand and saw her cuff shining gold in the candlelight.
Of course. Rumple had ordered her not to let anyone take off the collar but him. It had been so long ago, she had forgotten. But the cuffs hadn’t. Her vow to obey Rumpelstiltskin had protected her.

When Belle looked at Regina, the queen’s face was contorted in rage. But then, so suddenly it was like a magic trick, she laughed.

“A fighter,” she smirked. “I knew it. And it’s clear now how Rumple controls you. That’s useful information.” She patted her cheek. “Thank you, Belle.”

Belle’s stomach dropped. She had failed. She couldn’t say what test she had just taken, but it was obvious that she had done something wrong. As the queens sauntered past her, Belle looked around for Rumpelstiltskin.

He wasn’t in his chair anymore. But when Belle looked over to the crowd of singers, there he was. He was on the fringes of the circle. It seemed Leona was trying to draw him in closer.

“Come join us,” she invited. “Come and sing, it’s fun.”

He shook his head, raising a deferring hand. “The Dark One doesn’t sing, my dear. Not even for someone as lovely as you.”

Leona screwed her mouth in an expression of determined thought. “Maybe not tonight, then,” she conceded. “But I will get you to sing for me. Even if it’s at my funeral.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s face was almost somber as he answered. “No, Leona Ogg. I will sing to you before your funeral.”

Oblivious to his tone, Leona smiled at his words. “I’ll take it!”

Cruella clapped her hands together loudly. “Enough talking! It’s time for my song! Now, everybody! Cruella de Vil, Cruella de Vil, if she doesn’t scare you no evil thing will!”

With a subtle roll of the eyes, Rumple moved away from the crowd. Belle saw him wander over to the table. He strolled the length of it, waving his hand over any empty platter to fill it with food again. Belle went to him.

“Yes, dearie?” he spoke to her, but didn’t look at her. He put his hands behind his back, formal and stilted. He was still calling her dearie. Belle understood why, but it hurt to hear it.

“Excuse me,” she muttered, hanging her head a little. How could she tell him about what had happened? She nodded over to where Regina and Maleficent stood with the rest of the party, trying to give him a hint of the trouble she’d gotten into.

“Do you have anything to say that is actually worth my time, dearie?”

Belle swallowed, and dug her nails into her palms. She couldn’t do this. She could bear insults and offenses from everyone else in the room, but not from him. The point of this party was to show that she was his. Why was he now acting like he didn’t want her around him?

“Excuse me,” she backed away from him, blinking back tears.

She stood still as he moved past her. Then Rumple stopped in front of an empty platter.

“I know what happened,” he said in a low voice. Too low for anyone else to hear. “With the queens. But you were perfect, Belle. You did everything I wanted you to.”
“Thank you,” she breathed. Her shoulders relaxed. She felt some of the tension leave her body.

“You can still end this whenever you want to. But until you do, we must play our parts.”

The empty tray sufficiently restocked with tiny bowls of live baby eels, Rumple moved on.

Belle did the same, going over to the cabinet. It looked like singing had made everyone thirsty.

The evening wore on without further incident, and Belle was glad when people started saying good-bye. She didn’t dare stand beside Rumple as the guests filed out, but stayed a little behind and to the side, so she could see and hear everything.

Jafar was the first to leave. “It is a long journey back to my kingdom, but I do hope you will allow me to return the favor of your gracious hospitality.”

Rumple’s smile was thin-lipped. “I don’t know if the sultan would welcome me into his palace.”

At the reminder of his position, of the fact that he was only a grand vizier and not a ruler himself, Jafar’s face fell. “But the sultan will not live forever.”

Rumple patted the other man on the back as he walked him out. “Don’t get too ahead of yourself, Jafar. Even the mighty cobra can be taken down by a street rat.”

The parrot shook out its feathers. “Aw-awk! Riff-raff!”

Before Jafar could answer, Cruella de Vil practically pushed him out the door. “Darling!” She spoke to Rumple at a frantic pace, gesturing wildly with the hand that held her long pipe. “I’ve had the most marvellous time! This party will be the only thing I talk about for weeks! You even served aspic! I am absolutely floored! I enjoyed every single moment of tonight!”

Rumple’s expression was slightly more amused than it had been with Jafar. “I’m glad you had a good time,” he said in a deadpan voice.

“But you take care of yourself! And your pretty pet! Remember,” Cruella’s voice lowered, “the leash has two ends.”

Ursula was right behind her lover, a tentacle wrapped loosely around her arm. “Hold on to what you have,” she told Rumple. “Once you get a good woman, never let her stray too far.”

“Ursula, it’s been a pleasure, as always,” he said.

“Ta-ta, darling!” Cruella called as they went back to their white metal monster.

Belle heard Ursula asking if Cruella was fit to drive, but didn’t hear the other woman’s answer.

Jefferson and Leona were the next to leave. Swaying and leaning on her husband’s arm, Leona was still humming her hedgehog song as they approached.

“We have to do this again,” Jefferson’s eyes were bright as he spoke to Rumple.

“P’raps with not so many people next time,” Leona said saucily. “Just the four of us, maybe?” She caught Belle’s eye and winked at her.

Rumple smiled indulgently. “Perhaps you two could come for dinner some evening.”

“And breakfast,” Leona nodded in agreement.
Jefferson laughed and kissed his wife’s tousled hair. He stepped away from her for just a moment to offer his arms to Rumple. The two men embraced, just as they had when Jefferson arrived. “We will take your company in whatever form you wish to give it, Dark One.”

Rumple licked his lips, but didn’t look Jefferson in the eye when they separated. “Thank you, my boy. We, ah, we may yet call on you--and your lovely wife.”

Jefferson nodded and took off his hat. “We look forward to hearing from you--from you and Belle.” He made a point to smile at her before he set his hat to spinning. “It was great meeting you! Hopefully, next time you’ll be more talkative!”

Belle waved to them with a genuine smile. For all it hurt her to see them love each other, meeting Jefferson and Leona had been the best part of the whole night.

Magic swirled around the hat as it spun, taking the hat into itself and creating a hole like a whirlpool in a stream. Holding hands, Jefferson and Leona jumped into the copper-colored storm and vanished from sight. The magic faded and there was no trace of the hat or the couple.

Rumple let out a deep breath. “And the only ones left are the ones who were late to begin with.” He shook his head and went back into the dining room.

“Excuse me?” Belle reached out to him, even though he was already up the stairs and she was on the ground below him. It was the first time they had been alone since the party had begun. She didn’t want him to go back to those witches, not until she had spent a moment with just him.

He stopped, turned, and looked at her. His eyes looked dark and weary. He hadn’t liked this party any more than she had. “I’ll get rid of them,” he told her. “And then it’s time for bed.”

Belle nodded and tapped at the collar. “Right away?”

His face softened. “Of course, my sweet. I want to hear your real words again.”

“Thank you.”

He went on ahead and Belle made sure to stay a few paces behind him. If the queens weren’t to know the truth, it was best that she not give it away by standing as close to Rumple as she usually did.

Regina and Maleficent had made themselves quite comfortable in the dining room. Regina meandered around, examining Rumple’s collections of artefacts. Maleficent lounged in one chair and had her feet propped up on another, munching lazily on a bowl of purple flowers.

“Well, ladies, all bad things must come to an end. Shall I show you the door?”

“Oh, we’re not done yet, Rumple,” Regina said. “We have business to discuss with you.”

“Then I suggest you contact me during business hours. This was a social event and not the time to--”

“We wanted to make a deal!” Maleficent pouted. “But I suppose if it’s better that we come back some other time, we could all enjoy a nice long visit.”

Belle heard the threat in those words, the implicit promise to come to the castle on their own, without an invitation or announcement. Certainly, once they arrived they would make excuses to stay the whole day and possibly overnight.
It angered Belle to realize how powerful a threat it was, how it could destroy any day in her routine with Rumpelstiltskin. What if they came while he was spinning? What if they came when he was out? What if they came when Rumple and Belle were together? Or if they were in the middle of a game, while Belle was naked and vulnerable and her mind was clouded over?

No, Belle knew. That couldn’t be allowed to happen. As loathsome as their presence had been for a few hours, the thought of having them surprise her in her own home and stay for a full day was even worse.

Rumple seemed to come to the same conclusion. “Very well,” he said briskly. “But we must discuss it outside. My maid needs to start cleaning up. And then it will be farewell.”

Regina just snorted and strolled out the door with Maleficent behind her. “If that girl is a maid, then so am I.”

The two women giggled and Rumple closed the doors. For the first time that night, Belle was in a room with no one else and no demands being made of her. She threw her head back and groaned. There were no words to her groaning, so her thoughts didn’t come out as a forced courtesies. Even without words, her voice could give volume to her emotions. She could fill the room with the sound of her fatigue and her weariness and her deep, unrelenting desire to never speak to anyone beside Rumpelstiltskin again.

Perhaps, on some day far in the future, Belle would look back on this party with fondness. It was, after all, the night she had met Leona and Jefferson. And Rumple had said that she had done well, that he was proud of her. That was the most important part. Belle looked forward to having the unsavory aspects of the party fade from her memory and leave behind nothing but pleasantness.

But for now, all Belle had was exhaustion and pain. She had learned to walk in her shoes, but had not learned how to keep her feet from hurting. Her arms ached from carrying the tray. Her face hurt from smiling so many false smiles. Her upper back itched from all the scabbing wounds that decorated her up to the shoulders. Belle didn’t know the reason for the throbbing ache in her lower back, but it was there just the same.

The table was littered with half-eaten food and neglected cups. Using the last of her strength, Belle cleared away a space just large enough for her to lie on. She hoisted herself up and lay on her back, her feet dangling in the air.

Even having that was a relief. To keep her full weight off of her tired feet made her feel so much better. She pressed her back into the hard wood of the table and rubbed her face until she felt like a human being and not some kind of automaton.

Slowly, Belle moved her hands down from her face to her neck. The wretched collar was still fastened tightly around her throat. She was no more capable of removing it than Regina had been. The cuffs pushed her hands away from her collar and down to her chest. They brushed against the golden threads that hung from both her nipples and a shot of desire hit Belle like a bolt of lightning.

Oh.

She hadn’t expected this, but it made perfect sense. She had spent the whole evening being stimulated and teased by the wax on her nipples. She had spent the whole evening on edge, going from guest to guest and trying to evade lewd comments and unwelcome touches. That was a state of arousal, even if it was an unpleasant one. In her time as Rumpelstiltskin’s thing, her body had learned to pair pain with pleasure, and she had been in pain all evening.
Belle’s hands slid down her stomach, to the gap between her golden belt and her soaking flesh.

Of course she was wet. She had spent the whole evening in Rumpelstiltskin’s presence but unable to be with him. She had spent the whole evening wanting him, and now her body was ready to have him.

She touched herself, her fingers exploring her body as she waited for Rumple to come back. He would come back soon, she knew. He would dispatch those hateful women and rush to be by Belle’s side. He would open the doors and see her like this, laid out for him like a feast.

With her other hand, Belle pushed aside her long skirt, her pale legs a stark contrast to the red fabric. She spread her legs on the table edge, making herself wide and welcoming. Would he even speak to her before he entered her? Before he thrust himself into her with a force so powerful it would make her scream? She could imagine the weight of him on top of her, the solid hardness of his cock. She could almost hear the rhythmic tinkle of the glasses and plates clinking against each other as he pounded her into the table over and over again.

Belle tried to draw out her pleasure by thinking of a different scenario. Perhaps he would be too weary to fuck her the usual way. Perhaps he would push her hand away from her cunt and bend over to pleasure her with his mouth. Perhaps it would take him a while to be ready. Perhaps it would arouse him to make her come two or three times. Perhaps after that he would pull her off the table and set her on her knees to suck his cock.

Jerking, Belle could feel her orgasm bubbling to the surface, her body a pot ready to boil over. She rubbed herself faster, focusing on her pleasure spot, using her other hand to lightly pluck at the threads between her breasts. Perhaps she could get him to take her in a bed, to fuck her on a mattress and pillows, both of them naked and sweating as their bodies joined.

Belle’s pulse quickened. She was going to come and it was going to be a good one. Rumple would praise her as he fucked her cunt. He would tell her how perfect she was, how beautiful, how brave, how clever. He would bury his hands in her hair and pull her close to him and kiss her as he--

“What are you doing?” a woman’s voice scolded her.

Her hand jumped from her cunt and Belle sat up abruptly. Regina was still here. She had come back into the dining room, with Maleficent. Rumple trailed behind them, walking like a man condemned.

“Excuse me?” Belle tried to cover herself, but Maleficent just laughed.

“Excuse me?” she said again. “Right away!”

Regina rolled her eyes and spoke to Rumple. “Tell me you won’t make her wear that to my palace.”

“And let you have a magic item as well as my servant?” Rumpel’s voice was bright, artificially bright. He tutted. “I never do two-for-the-price-of-one!”

Belle looked at him. Her voice was small as she asked, “Excuse me?”

“Look at her!” Regina laughed. “She’s so confused!”

Belle kept her eyes on Rumple, she saw his jaw tighten. He hated this. Why was he letting this happen if he hated it?
With one finger on Belle’s chin, Maleficent forced her to look away from Rumple and focus on the women in front of her. Maleficent was cheerful as she explained what was going on, speaking to Belle as though she were a simpleton. “We want you. So we’re going to take you. For three days.” She wiggled three fingers in front of Belle for emphasis. Her voice lowered as she went back to Regina. “One day for each hole.”

“Excuse me!” It was as much of a cry for help as Belle was able to make. She pushed herself off the table and ran to Rumple. He would stop them. He had to stop them from taking her!

But when she collapsed at his feet and kissed his boots, he only stepped away from her.

“Stand up,” he ordered. “Stop making a scene.”

The cuffs pulled her up but could not stop the tears running down her face. This wasn’t right. He had said if she kissed his boots it would all be over.

“The party’s done, dearie.” He answered the question she couldn’t ask. “I made a deal with the queens, and I never break a deal.” He gave her a look that Belle was too distraught to interpret.

“You’re sure we can’t persuade you to extend her stay?” Regina gave Rumple a smile that she probably thought was charming. “Seven days is so much more satisfying than three.”

“You expect me to go seven days without my toy?” He shook his head. “And you didn’t even offer to send a replacement.”

“I would, if I had anyone in my service who deserves you.”

“I could say the same thing about you, Regina. I mean, the opportunity to pleasure a queen is such a unique honor.”

“Almost as much as getting into bed with the Dark One,” Regina smirked. “I’m sure your Belle knows the sorts of things people like us find amusing.”

Belle hugged her arms over her chest and looked down at the ground like a child. She tried to convince herself this was a nightmare she could wake up from.

“And you are going to return her?” Rumple said. “I would hate to have to come all the way to your kingdom and fetch her after three days. It would be so… inconvenient.” He punctuated the warning with an impish giggle.

“Yes, of course,” Maleficent said. “We’re friends, aren’t we, Rumple? We keep our promises to each other.”

“But we must be going,” Regina said. “Are you going to prepare her for travel or shall I?”

Rumple didn’t say anything, merely waved his hands. In an instant, Belle was bundled up in more clothes than she had ever worn at one time, even on the coldest days at home. She was encased in wool and fur—from a sheepskin hat to a pair of sturdy boots. She didn’t feel the collar anymore.

“Please,” Belle whimpered. Her first words in ages and she was begging him. “Please don’t make me go with them, Rum—”

“Don’t say my name!” He turned on her, fearsome and terrible. “The name of the Dark One has power and is not to be called on for fripperies! I am your master, and you will do as I say, dearie!”
He panted, after shouting at her. Silent tears ran down Belle’s cheeks and landed on a woolen scarf wrapped around her neck.

When he spoke again, his voice was calmer. “Obey me in this: Go with the queens, give them everything they want to take from you, and come back after three days.”

Through layers of protective garments, Belle felt the cuffs grow warm at his order. She breathed. Her breath trembled, but she could breathe.

He was looking at her. It seemed his eyes were trying to undo his cruel words. Belle tried her best to hold his gaze, to look at him and trust him, even when everything felt like it was going wrong.

“Well, come along,” Regina said, yanking Belle by the arm.

They went out into the courtyard, where Maleficent had continued on ahead. As Belle and Regina went down the stairs to the avenue, a poisonous green glow surrounded the other woman. By the magical light, Belle could see Maleficent’s body change. She grew taller than the outside wall. The long sleeves of her gown seemed to take on the shape of wings. Her headdress became true horns. Her neck grew long and thick, but her smile remained and soon the green glow poured from her mouth in the unmistakable flame of dragonfire.
From atop the dragon’s back, Belle could see Rumpelstiltskin’s castle shrinking in the distance. She couldn’t stop looking at her home as it grew farther away from her every moment. All too soon, the castle disappeared from sight and Belle had nothing to look at but the icy peaks of the mountains.

Regina sat further up the dragon, by the long neck and above the powerful wings that held them all aloft. She rode astride Maleficent like she was riding a horse, her head held high, her back perfectly straight. She was the very image of a queen, powerful and fearless.

Belle had been stowed near Maleficent’s tail like a piece of cargo loaded onto a wagon. As a dragon, Maleficent had twin ridges of spikes that grew up from between her wings and all the way down her spine. Belle was wedged longways between two ridges, lying on her stomach and looking at the night sky below her. The spikes were bladed like knives and only the heavy clothes Rumple had bundled her into protected her from injury as she lay helpless on the dragon’s body.

The wools and furs protected her from the cold, from the winds that whipped around them as they flew. Before she left, Rumple had covered her in boots and mittens overcoats and underthings—layer after layer of clothing. Only her face was exposed, and even that was mostly covered by a fur hood and a woollen scarf. Snow lay on the ground, and icy winds blew all around them, but Belle stayed warm. She pressed her cheek to the dragon’s skin, and felt the fires burning inside.

Every now and again, Maleficent breathed a streak of green fire across the night sky. By that light, and by the silvery light of the moon, Belle could see the landscape below her changing. Slowly, the jagged mountains became more gently sloped. Trees grew out of the snow, spindly things at first, that slowly became a forest of mighty oaks and pines. The trees were black in the shadowy night,
somehow more threatening than the glimmering ice and rocks that surrounded Rumple’s castle. They were taking her farther away from him.

Belle tried not to think about those last terrible moments in the castle, when Rumple had not only allowed these witches to take her, but had ordered her to go with them. He had looked so mournful as he gave the command. His eyes had betrayed his words for lies, but it had made no difference. He didn’t want this, Belle knew it, but it didn’t matter what he wanted, she had to obey what he said.

He had ordered her to go with Regina and Maleficent. He had given her over to them. He knew she didn’t want to leave him. He knew what kind of evil these two were capable of. He hadn’t wanted to make her go.

But he had done it anyway.

Slow tears rolled down Belle’s cheeks, and the wind roughly blew them away. She looked down at the ground and tried to breathe. In the blackness of the forest, tiny orange dots sparked across the land like embers on a smoldering log. The dragon was crossing over populated areas now. Every one of those embers was itself a fire, a home where people were keeping warm against the winter night. There were thousands of them, laid across the land as far as Belle could see.

“This is my kingdom,” Regina shouted back to her. “I hold the power of life and death over everyone here!”

Belle felt a wave of pity go through her, a deep sorrow for every man, woman, and child who called Regina their queen. A ruler was supposed to be good and kind, a protector against danger. From what Belle had seen of Regina, she was the danger from which innocent people needed to be protected. In every way but her appearance, the queen of this kingdom was the monster mothers warned their children to fear.

It occurred to Belle that she should save her pity for herself. For the next three days Regina held the power of life and death over her, too.

“And that’s my palace!” she shouted again, pointing at a massive structure built on the shores of a lake. “Isn’t it magnificent?”

The palace was built like no castle Belle had ever seen. From the air, Belle could see no walls around the building, no keep in the center, no towers or battlements. It wasn’t even made of stone, but of great metal spires that stuck out into the air like a pin cushion. The whole thing was silver and sleek and evil. Perhaps one could call it impressive, but all Belle saw was danger and ugliness and wasted expense.

“It suits you!” she shouted up to the queen.

Maleficent swooped around the palace in a slow circle before landing in a courtyard. The snow melted underneath her and the grass underneath the snow withered and burned. Servants and guards came out from the castle and rushed across the snow to their queen.

With a practiced grace, Regina dismounted from her place at Maleficent’s neck and slid down the dragon’s body. She landed on her feet and gave a satisfied sigh.

“I do love riding you, my dear.” She stroked Maleficent’s black scales.

Wanting to get to the ground as quickly as possible, Belle pulled herself up from her place between the spikes and jumped the short distance to the ground. She landed on her hands and knees.
Regina laughed when she saw her. “Yes, just stay down there. Keep groveling the whole time and we won’t have any trouble!”

Belle got to her feet anyway, brushing the blackened grass off of her cloak. Behind them, Maleficent transformed again. Poison-green fire flared around the dragon and lavender smoke wafted off of woman as she joined the other two.

“I love flying,” she said with her eyes closed. Smoke rose up out of her mouth as she spoke. When she opened her eyes, they still glowed green. “We must find a way for us to fly together, my darling.”

“Yes,” Regina breathed heavily. She reached for the other woman and they embraced so tightly that light could not have passed between them. Each woman’s hands gripped tightly to the other’s body as their hips ground against each other and their lips snarled into kisses.

“Your Majesty!”

A man called to Regina from across the courtyard. He looked like he was hurrying toward them as quickly as he could while still maintaining his dignity. An older man, he walked with the self-importance of a butler or a steward. The black and silver uniform he wore was more elaborate than that of the men tending the courtyard, but it was still livery that marked him as the queen’s servant.

Rolling her eyes at being so rudely interrupted, Regina snapped at the man. “What?”

The servant hesitated before he spoke. He was a short man, Belle noticed, what hair he had was slowly graying from black to silver. Belle was surprised to see that he didn’t seem to be afraid of Regina. He stood up straight as he delivered his news.

“While you were out, there was a message from King George. He says the prince--”

“I don’t care about princes,” Regina cut him off. “Will this message help me find my step-daughter?”

The old man frowned, but didn’t cower. “No, it’s about the prince’s engagement--”

“Then it can wait. I’m sick of hearing wedding announcements every other day. Everybody in this world is so gods-damned sickeningly happy.” Regina spat out the word.

Maleficent came to the queen’s side. She draped herself over Regina and nibbled on her earlobe as she crooned. “We can be happy too, my love. Even if our happiness looks different than other people’s.”

That seemed to placate Regina. She nodded to Maleficent and then turned to the servant. “Is the Mirror Room ready for another guest?”

“Always, Your Majesty. But--” he fell silent, looking at the ground.

“Always, Your Majesty. But--” he fell silent, looking at the ground.

“Yes?” Regina said icily. “Do you have something to say?”

The old man looked at Regina. He didn’t seem to notice Belle. The sorrow and concern in his expression was meant for the queen and not her victims. “It’s the third time this month.”

Regina sneered. “Well maybe this one will satisfy me!” She swept away from them all, storming off as the old man and the other servants hurried after her.

Belle stayed with Maleficent in the courtyard for a moment, watching everyone depart. Then
Maleficent gave an exasperated sigh and took Belle by the arm.

“Come along,” she pulled at her. “My beloved will meet us there.”

Belle scurried to keep up with Maleficent’s long and purposeful strides. “Do you always let her brush you off like that?”

“We have an arrangement,” the other woman said. “She is queen in her castle and I am queen in mine. Right now we’re doing what she wants, and that includes what we’re going to do to you.”

The halls inside the castle were cold, polished stone. As they passed, servants and courtiers alike gave them a wide berth. Most of them pointedly looked in the other direction, but a few--mostly women--shook their heads and looked at Belle with sympathetic horror.

Belle swallowed down her fear. “The old man said you’ve done this before?”

“Lots of times.”

“But it didn’t make her happy?”

Maleficent stopped in front of a door. It looked no more or less remarkable than any other door in this hallway. Her face was tired as she answered Belle: “Nothing keeps Regina happy for long.”

The queen was already in the room when they entered. She was lounging on a large sofa upholstered with dark purple velvet. She stood up as they entered, her arms raised to embrace Maleficent.

“Where were we, my treasure?”

“Right where we ought to be.”

The two women kissed with a fiery passion, like each was desperate to consume the other. Belle stepped away from them and looked around the room.

At first, it seemed like an ordinary bedchamber. The bed was large with a royal purple coverlet. The four posts were made of carved oak, black with age. There was a table and chairs for meals, the purple sofa was in front of the fireplace. A large mirror in an ornate silver frame hung one corner, positioned so that it could reflect everything in the room. Ostentatious as it was, the mirror seemed like a perfectly reasonable object for a person like Regina to have in her possession.

Belle didn’t start to panic until she saw the chains on the far wall. Iron chains, which would have been at home in any dungeon, hung from rings in the stone in this room. Thick shackles hung from the chains, and there were more items scattered on the floor by that wall. Belle could make out manacles and shackles and other iron implements that Belle couldn’t remember the names for or couldn’t imagine the use of. There was even an iron collar, thicker and bulkier than the one she had worn for Rumpelstiltskin, with a ring in the middle. As she looked around, Belle saw hooks and rings fixed into the walls all over the room, and even hanging from the rafters in the ceiling.

Belle’s heart pounded. She was going to be sick.

The queens of darkness broke apart. When Regina saw Belle’s expression, she laughed. “You’re not afraid of us, are you?” she teased. “Come now, we can’t be that much worse than the Dark One.”

“He never put me in irons,” Belle whispered. And it was true. Obeying the cuffs could be a trial sometimes, but the act of wearing them never hurt her. She could go through her day without being burdened by the weight of them. They were light and golden and lovely, almost like jewelry. They
were a sign of the deal she made with Rumpelstiltskin, of the day she had saved her people.

But irons were a sign of slavery. Prisoners were fettered and hobbled. Criminals walked around with their hands bound for the safety of those who detained them. Animals were chained and led around on a leash. And Belle was not an animal. Even in the beginning, even when Rumpel gave her his most humiliating orders, he had never made her feel sub-human. Like the cuffs themselves, his orders were a sign of their deal, a sign of her value, not her degradation.

Regina frowned and stepped away from Maleficent to talk to Belle. “Don’t talk about him any more,” she commanded. “Your master sold you to us. So for as long as you’re here, we are the ones with the power. You will do whatever we say. Do you understand?”

Belle nodded. “Yes, Regina.”

Eyes livid, Regina slapped Belle across the face. The shock was as sharp as the pain and Belle brought a hand to her cheek, her breath suddenly ragged. She had never been hit in the face before. Rumple had never even threatened it.

“What did you call me?” Regina said through gritted teeth.

“R-regina,” Belle said, and she was slapped again, hard enough to knock her to her knees. She stayed down.

“Who am I?” Regina shouted at her. “What am I?”

“A queen!” Belle shrieked. “The queen! The only queen in this kingdom!”

“That’s better,” Regina said darkly. Behind her, Maleficent leaned against the wall to watch. “And how do you address a queen?”

“Y-your Majesty,” Belle stammered.

“Exactly. So when I ask if you understand something, you will say...?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Good. I hope we don’t have to repeat this lesson. Get it through your stupid skull before I have to get angry.”

Was she not angry now? Was this Regina before she got angry? “I--I hope so too, Your Majesty.”

“And why are you still wearing your travel clothes?” Regina berated her. “It’s rude! Take off your cloak when you get in a room or else people will think you don’t want to stay.” She grabbed Belle by the jaw and made her look into her eyes. “And you do want to stay with us, don’t you, pet?”

“Yes,” Belle whimpered. She knew better than to say anything else. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Then take off your clothes!”

Regina released Belle so roughly that it threw her to the ground. Rolling with the impact, Belle stayed down and tried to gather up her cloak so she could take it off. But the cloak was fastened around her neck by a brooch. She fumbled with the brooch, but couldn’t remove it while she was wearing mittens. And she couldn’t grip one mitten to take it off while she was still wearing the other one. And the queens wanted her to undress and she was trying but it was so hard.

“Look at the little thing, she’s crying.” Maleficent spoke with only vague interest. “Do you think we
I like watching the stupid cow struggle,” Regina said as Belle pulled off one mitten with her teeth. “But we do only have three days.”

She got up from her place on the couch and pulled Belle to her feet. Maleficent came to her as well, smirking like a snake. Together, they pulled the cloak over her head and tossed it to the ground. Regina snatched off Belle’s other mitten and her hat and cast them aside.

Maleficent took one end of the woolen scarf in her hand and spun Belle around until the whole thing unwound from around her neck. Belle stumbled and Maleficent caught her from behind. She pulled at the coat Rumple had put under Belle’s cloak. The fabric tore with a rip so loud that for a moment everything else in the room stopped.

In the silence, Belle could hear Maleficent’s breathing behind her—slow and shallow panting. She saw Regina’s chest rise and fall. Belle saw the queen’s eyes glint and her smile become savage as a new idea dawned on her.

They didn’t speak, these evil women. Belle looked back and forth at both of them and she saw how they understood each other, how they could formulate a joint plan without having to say a single word. It would have been impressive, if she hadn’t known they were planning to hurt her.

Without warning, Regina lunged at Belle. Her fingers were raised like claws, her black-painted nails like talons. She ripped open Belle’s coat, popping out the buttons and leaving them scattered on the floor. Belle’s second layer was a waistcoat made of wool so tightly knitted that Regina had to use magic to cut it open. She pulled apart a third shirt, and then again a forth. Rumple had bundled her in layer after layer, but Regina tore through them all.

Behind her, Belle felt Maleficent doing the same thing to her skirts. She tore at the fabric with her fingernails and used magic when her physical strength failed her. She found Belle’s skin before Regina did and the discovery made her squeal with delight.

“Look at this, my darling!” She ripped a larger hole in Belle’s petticoats. “She’s all my favorite colors!”

Regina came around to look at Belle’s behind. Belle covered her arms over what was left of her bodice and tried to stay still while they poked at her.

“Look here!” Maleficent cried. Her finger stabbed at a different bruise with every word and Belle bit her lip to keep from crying out. “She’s black and purple and even green! Do you think her whole body looks like this?”

“We saw most of her body earlier,” Regina said dryly. “But I’m curious as to how well-groomed she is. Let’s get rid of the rest of it.”

Suddenly, Belle was entirely naked. All of the clothes Rumple had magically summoned had been magically dismissed. She clutched her arms even tighter around her chest, fighting the urge to crouch down into a ball to hide herself completely. Her heart pounded and she had to fight for every breath.

But when she looked down at herself, she saw that she was still wearing the cuffs. Regina hadn’t been able to make them disappear. Belle saw them, and let out a breath in an amazed chuckle.

Everything seemed so clear now. Regina couldn’t remove the cuffs. She had no power over them, so she had no power over Belle. Rumple still owned her. She would still go back to him after three days. If she could just endure this, she would be safe again soon. Belle hugged her arms over her
chest at the thought. For once, she trembled with relief instead of fear.

Regina snatched Belle’s hands away from her body. “Don’t cover yourself in front of us! We want to be able to look at what we’ve bought, whore!”

Clearly, she had meant that as an insult. But Rumple had called Belle a whore so sweetly, and so many times, that the word had lost all impact. She was a whore, there was no denying it. She had sold her body as payment for a service.

And Belle didn’t regret it. Becoming a whore had saved her life, had saved the lives of everyone she loved. Being a whore had given her more knowledge and experience and feeling than she had ever expected to have. Even now, even during this trial, Belle would say without question that becoming a whore by making her deal with Rumpelstiltskin had been the best decision she ever made.

“With respect, Your Majesty, you’re wrong.” Her voice was soft, but steady.

“What?” Regina snapped.

“You’re wrong. People don’t buy whores. They just rent them for a little while.” She held up one wrist. The golden cuff caught the firelight strangely, so it seemed to glow with its own light. “You don’t own me. I’m expensive, and whatever you paid, it wasn’t enough. I will be going back to my owner when all this is done. And I will tell him what you’ve done to me.”

For a moment, Regina looked like she had just swallowed poison. Then she threw her head back and laughed.

Maleficent joined in, chuckling cruelly as she held Belle’s face in one hand. “You won’t have to tell him, princess. We’ll leave marks all over your pretty body, so every time Rumple looks at you he’ll know exactly how we’ve tortured you.”

“And we’ll start by making you look presentable.” Regina waved her hand and a set of iron shackles came clanking across the stone floor from their place hanging on the wall. She picked them up off the ground and held them up for Belle to see.

The shackles were two separate pieces of iron, one for each wrist. There was a ring affixed to each one so that a chain could be wound through them. The wearer could have their hands bound together or forced apart, depending on the whims of the jailer.

Without a word, Regina unhinged one shackle and clamped it over Belle’s wrist. She did the same with the other, locking the hinges together with a magical blue glow. The iron was so heavy, Belle couldn’t lift her arms up to cover her body. She stood with her hands hanging like dead weights by her sides. Already, she could feel the rough metal scratching and chafing at her skin. The ugly black shackles covered her golden cuffs completely.

“For now you belong to us,” Regina said. “And we’ll do with you as we like.”

Regina and Maleficent stood on either side of Belle and dragged her over to the mirror, all three of them standing before it. The queens were still magnificent—coiffed and gowned and polished to a shine. Belle stood between them, naked and weak. Her face was tear-streaked and pale, her hair a shambles. She looked so small compared to them, so pitiful and ragged.

“Does Rumple actually fuck you at all?” Regina looked at Belle’s reflection to ask. “I don’t think he does. I don’t think he can even find your cunt under all that hair!”

Without warning, she reached for the curls between Belle’s legs and pulled. Belle gasped, and the
pain was so intense she could make no other sound. She jerked her body away from Regina, but fell back into Maleficent.

Maleficent held Belle against her body with one hand. With the other, she also felt between Belle’s legs, prying her open for Regina’s perusal.

“Now, I’m sure you have a simply lovely little rose bud,” Maleficent whispered in her ear. They were all still facing the mirror. Belle saw the reflection of Maleficent’s pale fingers running along the folds of her secret places. “But this whole thing is such a bed of thorns, we’ll never get to see it! And we want to see all of you.”

“Lift her arms up,” Regina said. “I’m sure she’s hairy as a man there, too.”

Maleficent did as her lover commanded, exposing the wiry brown hairs growing in Belle’s armpits.

“Disgusting,” Regina sneered.

“Do we need to fix her legs?” Maleficent spun Belle around to face her. Her green eyes bore into her as she said, “I only like women in my bed, not farm animals.”

“Let’s make this country girl acceptable to bed royalty.”

They worked in silence. Regina looped a chain through the rings of Belle’s iron shackles and Maleficent hooked her up to a chain wrapped around the rafters. Belle was strung up like a side of meat in a butcher’s stall. If she extended her toes she could just touch the ground, but for the most part she hung there, helpless.

They circled her. Regina held a stiff brush and used it to rub Belle’s body raw from the neck down. Maleficent followed after with a cloth covered in sharp-smelling soap.

“Are you cleaning me?” Belle winced.

“Of course,” Regina said. “I can’t imagine what creepy-crawlies you’ve caught from being near that imp.”

Using those tools, they familiarized themselves with Belle’s naked body, forcing her open and exposing her to their critique.

“What small tits you have,” Regina grabbed one of Belle’s breasts, pinching her and squeezing at her nipples. “Not very feminine.”

“I don’t know,” Maleficent took Belle’s other breast, so that both of them were holding her at the same time. “I’d call that a good handful.” She twisted and pulled at Belle’s flesh until she cried out. “And sensitive too!”

“You’re hurting me!” Belle blinked back tears.

Regina scoffed and rubbed the stiff brush between Belle’s legs. “I can’t believe you can feel anything under that pelt.”

There were many asides like that. Comments were made about the size of her bottom and her hips. According to them, Belle was both too small and too large to be really attractive. Her freckles were common, her feet were filthy. Her ribs were too skinny and her belly was too round.

And over and over and over they derided her for the hair on her body. Not only the hair around her
secret places, but also the fine brown strands on her legs and on her arms and even on her toes. They mocked her for the hair under her arms and for the shape of her eyebrows.

“If Rumple had any taste at all he wouldn’t let his slut run around like a wild thing,” Maleficent said indulgently. “We’re doing him a favor by taking care of you.”

Regina took a wine glass and threw it on the floor. It shattered into pieces and the shards flew up into the air and came down to scrape along Belle’s skin. The shards cut through her hairs and nicked her skin in a thousand tiny cuts.

“Please!” Belle screamed, tears flowing freely down her face. “Mercy, please, Your Majesty!”

Regina just laughed.

Perhaps it was because of her begging, but Regina stopped the glass from shaving between Belle’s legs. The shards cut off most of the curls, but didn’t touch her skin. That was Maleficent’s task.

Maleficent held a ball of a sticky paste that she rubbed in her hands to make it malleable. When she stuck the ball against Belle’s new fuzz, it ripped the hair out by the root. For a moment, Belle’s vision went white with pain. Maleficent rubbed the ball against Belle’s mound, over her lower lips and into her folds. Her touches were followed by the soap, and then a heated oil, but even that soft warmth felt wretched against Belle’s raw and tender flesh.

Regina came and inspected Maleficent’s handywork. She rubbed her fingers around Belle’s most private places, but that violation meant little compared to the physical agony of being touched at all.

“Flawless, my love!” Regina reached for Maleficent and they kissed.

The hook lowered and Belle was able to fall to her knees. Her hands were still raised over her head, but she was able to press her thighs together, to protect herself against more molestation, to ease the pain just a little bit. Her breath came in weak rasps, but she could breathe.

The queens turned their attention back to Belle. Her face needed improvement and her hair was a disaster. A hairbrush was summoned and enchanted. It ripped through the knots in Belle’s hair without mercy, setting her scalp aflame with pain. It had been so long since anyone had brushed her hair but Rumple. And these women had none of his patience, none of his gentle tenderness. They were trying to hurt her, and they were succeeding.

And Belle wasn’t even allowed to cry because it would spoil the cosmetics.

They coated her face in foul-smelling liquids and powders and creams. They forced her head back and her eyes open and told her not to blink. They poked paint into her eyes and covered her lip and her cheeks in rouge. Regina even rubbed the red powder onto her nipples and between her legs.

“A perfect trollop,” she smiled when she was finished.

Maleficent tapped her fingers over her lips as she thought. “She needs something else, I think. Something—ah!”

She wiggled her fingers and an iron object floated up from the chains by the wall. Belle was too weak and disoriented to make out what it was until she felt it close around her neck with a snap.

It was the collar she had seen earlier. An iron collar, even heavier and more cumbersome than the golden one Rumple had made her wear for the party. The party seemed so long ago, now, even though it had only been a few hours since she’d left.
When she saw what Maleficent had done, Regina grinned wickedly. “Now let’s turn her around and let the slut see what she looks like.”

They pushed her by the shoulders to look in the mirror.

Belle had seen faces like hers before. On first glance she looked more like a painted mummer than a prostitute, a clown more than an object of desire. But she knew she wore the markings of a harlot: A white face to cover blemishes, eyes painted a smolderly black, bright red lips that were an advertisement for what was under her skirts. The magic brush had swept her hair up off her neck in a louse, tousled bun. She looked like she had already been fucked. This was the first time she had seen her face in months and she looked like a wretched stranger.

“That’s better,” Regina purred. “That’s how you should look, you little tramp. But I wonder who you really are.” Her dark eyes peered into Belle’s reflection, but then her gaze shifted to herself. Belle watched Regina’s image in the mirror as she waved her hand and spoke. “Magic mirror on the wall, who’s this creature in my hall?”

For a moment, the mirror glowed with an unnatural blue light. Belle looked at her face and saw the reflection shimmer, and change, and become—her face.

But it wasn’t Belle as she was now. The girl in the mirror wore no cosmetics. She had no collar around her throat. She wasn’t naked, but wore instead—Belle gasped—her golden dress. Belle’s mouth fell open, but her reflection kept her lips pressed together in a thin line. It seemed that she was fighting every instinct to cry out. Tears welled up in the reflection’s eyes as unseen hands pulled her hair up to brush it.

“This thing is going to break, Belle.”

The voice came from the mirror strangely, as though it were coming from a long distance away. But then, what longer distance could there be than time itself? Belle knew the voice, knew the night they were looking at. She knew the reflection this magic mirror saw.

“Jeanne,” Belle whispered. She lifted her manacled hands to the glass, reaching out as the mirror revealed the image of her cousin.

It was the night of her betrothal feast, the night of her first real conversation with Gaston, the night she had realized how terribly unsuited she was for the life that had been chosen for her.

Belle watched herself put on a brave face for her ladies, for her people. She saw her expression of bitter hope at the certainty that marrying Gaston was the only way to save them all from ogres. She watched herself swallow her discomfort and succumb to the ordeal of having her hair brushed. At the time, that had been the greatest physical pain she had ever endured.

Behind her, Regina and Maleficent stood in silence. Were they seeing what Belle saw? Did they know what night they were looking at or who these people beside her were?

In the mirror, Mathilde was applying cosmetics to Belle’s face, much more tenderly than the queens had earlier. Her friend was always so gentle, and so quick to admire beauty in anyone.

“Gaston is lucky to have such a lovely bride.”

The image blurred and faded away, leaving Belle to look at her new face yet again. Tears burned hot against her eyes. Thank the gods that the mirror had stopped there. The next thing to happen that night was that Ermentrude had given Belle her mother’s necklace—and there was no way she could have watched that again without bawling like a child.
She felt rattled and raw enough as it was.

“So,” Regina’s voice cut like a cold knife through Belle’s heated thoughts. “Gaston has a lovely bride. That wouldn’t be Sir Gaston, would it? The second son of the Duke of the Frontlands?”

Belle knelt on the cold ground, her eyes closed to keep her tears inside. She shook and wept and did not speak.

“Answer me.” Regina said in a soft sing-song that was nevertheless a command.

“Yes,” Belle whispered. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You know, I think I’ve met Sir Gaston of the Frontlands. His father is one of my courtiers.”

Belle opened her eyes. Was that true? She couldn’t remember what kingdom Gaston was from.

“He seems like enough of a man for most women. Didn’t you like him?”

Belle shook her head but didn’t speak.

Beside her, Maleficent crouched down and put her hands on Belle’s shoulders. The gesture might have been comforting, if she wasn’t dragging her fingernails against the scabs on Belle’s back.

“Pretty princesses like you shouldn’t ever have to marry awful men. But it’s simply terrible that you had to trade that prison for the one you’re in now with Rumple.”

Still teary, Belle shook her head again. “I’d rather be where I am--where I was. I’d rather be his thing than Gaston’s wife.”

Regina laughed at that. “I hated my marriage too, but there are easier ways to get out of it!”

Belle didn’t answer. It wasn’t worth the trouble to explain, to tell these evil women the story of her village and her people and the terrible danger they Rumple had rescued them from. The terrible fate from which Rumple had rescued her.

“At least my husband left me a kingdom when he died,” Regina went on. “And as soon as his traitorous daughter is brought to justice I’ll finally have everything I want.”

Maleficent gave her love a sweet smile. “We can tear the snowflake’s heart out and eat it if it makes you happy, my darling.”

“Thank you, my jewel,” Regina said. Her face softened with what Belle thought might be honest contentment. “I can’t wait to punish someone who actually deserves our wrath. But for now, I suppose Rumple’s plaything will have to do.”

In the mirror, Belle saw Regina’s reflection look at her. Belle saw her own sky-blue eyes looking up at the queen in trembling dread. Regina’s red mouth opened to speak, but just then there was a knock on the door.

“Your Majesty?” The old man from the courtyard poked his head in the door. Regina and Maleficent turned to look at him. Belle could see his reflection from her place on the floor. Only too late did she realize that he could see her as well, see her scars and her breasts and her painted, whorish face.

For just a moment, the man looked at her. His expression held neither desire nor shock. His eyes flickered over her with nothing more than a weary and dismissive pity, no more than one would offer a beggar in the street.
To Belle’s surprise, Regina didn’t rage at the man, even though her fist clenched and her eyes bulged. “Are you really interrupting us now? When we’re in this room?”

The old man swallowed. “My apologies, Your Majesty, but there is a delegation from King Midas and they are adamant that you hear their message.”

“Do I look like I’m prepared for diplomacy?”

“Darling,” Maleficent said sweetly, “what’s the point of having a kingdom if you don’t bother to rule it? We’re at a perfectly good stopping place with the girl. Why not see what the politicians want? The mood you’re in, it’s very likely they’ll give you everything you want.”

Regina snorted but didn’t argue. Straightening up, she sneered down at Belle. “Fine,” she said. “But those cheese-eaters better not waste my time. We only have two-and-half days left with the little whore.”

“She’ll keep,” Maleficent assured her. “Shall we keep her chained up while we’re away?”

“You’re brilliant as well as beautiful,” Regina kissed Maleficent quickly before going off with the old man. “You’ll come to my meeting chambers when you’re done?”

“Of course, my love. I would never play with a toy without you.”

Maleficent’s smile lasted until the door closed behind the queen. When she looked at Belle her expression was mercenary, businesslike. She didn’t speak, merely waved her hands around to move the chains that bound her.

The chains floated in the air and dragged Belle over to the wall. Link by link, the heavy iron looped itself into the hooks that had been screwed into the stone. It was so different than the cuffs. When Rumple bound her to the walls of his castle, Belle couldn’t move at all, and there was no possibility of fighting. In the chains, Belle could lift her arms, but it was a struggle, a heavy weight that burdened her. She had the ability to struggle against her fate, but it was easier to surrender. Belle was still in sight of the mirror, bearing witness to the image of her own misery.

“There you go,” Maleficent said. “That should keep you well enough. Try to take it easy while you can. We’ll be back before dinner.”

In the mirror, Belle could see the other woman wink at her before she shut the door and left her alone.

Leaning back against the cold stone, Belle closed her eyes and took as deep a breath as she could. The chain was slack enough that she could slide down the wall and sit on the stone floor. She took another breath, as deep as she could, which was not very deep at all. She sat with her legs splayed out in front of her. Her arms could move, but they were so heavy.

It wasn’t forever, she told herself. This wasn’t going to last for longer than three days. It would end, and soon. The queens would take her back, or Rumple would come and get her, or the cuffs would pull her by the wrists and drag her through the forests and mountains to bring her home.

Belle took another breath and wiped away the lingering tears. *Home*. When had Rumpelstiltskin’s castle become home? It had been so long since she had left the place where she had grown up. The castle and the village and the people she had given her life for weren’t her home anymore, not really. The face she had seen in the mirror belonged to a different girl altogether, a child whose certainties had all been ripped away from her.
She had new certainties now. As long as she wore Rumpelstiltskin’s cuffs, she knew who she was and what was expected of her. She trusted him in a way she could have never trusted Gaston. She trusted in Rumple’s deal, in his rules and his magic, in the ledgers he kept that always had to balance. She trusted in his rewards as well as his punishments. She trusted that he would make her keep the vows she had promised him—and that she was his forever, no matter who he loaned her to.

Even locked up in Queen Regina’s castle, Belle knew that nothing had really changed. Twisting her wrists under the manacles, Belle could feel the gold scraping against the iron. She still wore her cuffs, even if they were covered. She was still his. Soon, she would be with him again, safe and happy, where she belonged.

Her head drooped on her shoulders, and Belle tugged on the chain to see if it was slack enough to let her lie down. She had never slept on the floor in Rumple’s castle—even in the beginning, he had given her a bench and a pillow—but now she was too exhausted to notice her own discomfort. Belle stretched out as best she could on the polished stone and closed her eyes to the reflection of herself in the mirror.

With effort, Belle was able to lift her hands up to rub her face. The irons stank of rust and oil and the smells of the other prisoners who had worn these shackles. She took her hands away from her nose, resting her wrists on her body instead.

Tentatively, Belle reached down between her legs. The pain was a throbbing ache now, her flesh felt warm to the touch. In the mirror, Belle saw that the area was bright pink, like a fresh burn.

Rumple’s rule was for her to touch herself before she slept, to pleasure herself every night for as long as she wore the cuffs. In all the months she had served him, she had never missed her chance to obey him. Tonight could not be an exception.

Taking a deep breath, Belle gently rested her hand on her shaved mound. Immediately, she hissed at the pain. She wanted to pull her hand away but couldn’t—wouldn’t. She had a duty, she reminded herself. If the queens kept her from obeying Rumple then they had truly won.

Belle couldn’t allow that. She had to pleasure herself. No matter how much it hurt.

With another breath, Belle felt along her tender flesh. It was so smooth and soft she felt like a child—like the innocent at bathtime who had asked what those parts of her were called. *The place where husbands go*, Ermentrude had told her, and now Belle knew what an incomplete description that was.

Maleficent had covered her with a soothing oil, and that made it easier for Belle to slide her hands over her folds and up to her pleasure spot. She wasn’t wet, but how could she be? Nothing about tonight had been for her enjoyment. No thought, no care had been put in to her comfort. The queens wanted her to be miserable, and they had accomplished their goal.

Under the circumstances, finding pleasure was not only obedience to Rumpelstiltskin, but an act of defiance to the women who held her captive. They wanted her to suffer, so any joy she found would thwart their evil plans.

Belle took a breath, and tried to bring images to her mind. She thought of Rumpelstiltskin, fantasized that his mouth was on her cunt, a warm and soothing balm. She imagined his red tongue licking across her pink mound in slow strokes, swirling around her pleasure spot. His lips would kiss her in every place that hurt.

Rumple would make it better, she knew. As soon as she could get to him, as soon as she could talk
to him and know his thoughts again, his heart—then all would be well. Even if she could only know his body again, she would cherish the chance to pleasure him, to offer herself to him again, to be the vessel for his lusts.

What would he want her to do to him first? As soon as she came back to him, what would he ask of her? Belle wanted to kiss his boots, to give him her fealty and let him know that she still trusted him. Before she had left he had brushed her off, but when she got back it would be different.

It would have to be.

On the cold floor, Belle spread her growing wetness over her flesh. As soon as she saw Rumple she would kiss his boots and work her way up to his cock. She would suck him into hardness and offer her mouth to him, kissing and licking every part of him he allowed her access to.

Would he miss her, while she was gone? Did he miss her already, as she missed him? Was he thinking of her now, at this moment?

“Rumple,” her lips formed the word without her mind being a part of it. She was calling him, inviting him to look at her. “Rumpelstiltskin.”

Could he see her, now that she had said his name? That was the way it was supposed to work with the Dark One: Say his name once and you let him see you, say it twice and you’re inviting him in. If you say it three times, you’re commanding him to come to you, and woe on you if he didn’t want to be commanded.

Belle didn’t need to say his name any more than she had. If he could see her now, if he could know what she was thinking, what she was wanting—then that was all she needed. She could say his name again, if she needed to. She could summon him as she had in the war room. She could beg him to take her away from this awful place and these hateful women.

Or she could obey his order to obey the queens. She could give them what they wanted and come back after three days. Wouldn’t he be proud of her to know that she was up to the task? Belle could do it, she could endure whatever tortures they devised.

Her body jerked and pulsed for a moment. The orgasm was underwhelming but undeniable. She had done her duty. Belle rested her head on her arms and readied her body to sleep. Best to rest for as long as she could.

It might have been a dream, but Belle could have sworn that in the moments before she closed her eyes, she saw a man’s face glowing blue in the magic mirror.

Chapter End Notes

Also, I apologize to anyone who loves Regina and doesn't want to see her being the Evil Queen.
The Thorns

Chapter Summary

The Queens rape and torture Belle in a most singular fashion

Chapter Notes

So yeah, rape and torture, including nonconsensual kissing while someone is asleep. This chapter has thorns, so people who get squeamish around needles and piercings need to proceed with caution. We've also got forced cunnilingus. There is physical torment, bleeding, and verbal abuse throughout.

Even before Belle opened her eyes, her other senses were flooded. Rough iron shackles bit into her wrists. Chains held her down and against the wall. Hunger gnawed at her empty stomach. The iron collar gripped tight around her throat. She felt the coldness of the stone floor she had been sleeping on, felt the aches and discomfort that came from lying there for hours. Between her legs, she felt the heated throb of pain from where her hair had been ripped out the day before.

But on top of all these sensations, all this misery, Belle felt something soft. Warmth brushed against the gooseflesh on her arms. Something featherlight and lovely floated through the tangles in her hair. Still half-asleep, Belle heard a sound, sweet and musical. Someone was humming a tune.

The softness, the ease, traveled over Belle’s body. She felt herself relax and curl out, like a cat napping in the sun.

“That’s a good princess,” a pleasant voice praised her.

Belle felt the warmth against her face, felt the looseness and the comfort overtake her. How good it felt to not hurt anymore, to feel something tender for the first time in so long. Her jaw relaxed and her lips parted and then something hot and foreign was over her mouth and worming its way in between her teeth.

“No!” Belle gave out a muffled cry. She tried to resist, but it was no use. The hands that had been around her, had soothed her and pleased her, now gripped her and forced her to hold still.

Opening her eyes, Belle saw Regina on the other side of the room, sitting at a table laid with food, drinking from a glass of wine. Robed in a gauzy purple dressing gown, the queen did not bother to hide her disgust as she looked at Belle on the floor.

So Maleficent was kissing her now, forcing her to lie still and not resist. Maleficent had been touching her while she slept. Belle closed her eyes and tried to come up with some reality where this was a dream, a nightmare. Surely she would wake up in her cell in Rumpelstiltskin’s castle. Surely this wasn’t real!

But when Maleficent broke the kiss with a loud pop, Belle saw strings of saliva dripping down the
woman’s smiling face, and she knew that it was real. This was her life for the next two days, as a plaything for the queens.

“Now why did you have to wake up, princess?” Maleficent kept her hands on Belle as she spoke. Like Regina, she was wearing a dressing gown so sheer that Belle could see the pale outline of her body through the black material. Maleficent shook her head and tutted. “But I suppose princesses always wake up when you kiss them.”

“I keep telling you, she’s not a princess,” Regina declared from her seat. “The stupid toy isn’t royalty or nobility. She’s only the daughter of a landed knight. That’s barely even gentry.”

“Oh, no, my darling,” Maleficent looked at Regina sweetly while still stroking Belle. “Of course she’s a princess! All little girls are princesses, didn’t your mother teach you that?”

Grimacing, Regina stood up. “My mother taught me power only comes from blood. Blood you’re born with or blood you’ve spilled.” She looked down at Belle and sneered. “You don’t have either. You’re nothing!”

Belle looked up at her, too exhausted and unsettled to keep her questions to herself. “Then why are you bothering with me? If I’m so insignificant, why am I even worth torturing?”

“Because you’re Rumple’s sweet nothing,” Maleficent chirped, pulling her into an embrace. “Our Dark One usually plays his cards close to the chest, so when he starts waving around a little ace of hearts like you, well! How could we resist the opportunity to see what makes you so special?”

As subtly as she could, Belle inched herself away from Maleficent’s touch. “What are you finding out?”

“Nothing,” Regina said. “There’s nothing in you that can’t be found in a thousand other pretty girls. Maybe you’re just special because you can tolerate pain, or you can tolerate monsters. Maybe you’re special because you can get off on that sort of thing. Do you like fucking lizards instead of men? Is that why you made a deal to get out of your marriage?”

“No,” Belle said softly.

“Then what is it?” With her bare hand, Regina hit Belle across the ear so hard it made her head spin. “You’re just a stupid girl! You’re a broodmare, just like I was supposed to be! You’re supposed to be bought and sold to a man, for power or money or just because you have no other options!” She hit Belle again, on the other side of her head, and the force was enough to knock her out of Maleficent’s arms.

Maleficent got up off the floor and stood by Regina as the queen grabbed Belle by the hair and pulled her to her feet.

“I had to claw and fight and kill my way out of that life!” Chest heaving, she twisted her fist in Belle’s hair. Belle winced and felt hot tears of pain. “How did you get out of it? How were you saved from a husband? Why should you be so lucky?”

She threw Belle to the ground and turned to Maleficent’s waiting embrace. Belle landed on her side and stayed on the stone floor, breathing deeply through the pain of impact. Blinking back her tears, Belle made herself look at the queens. In Maleficent’s arms, Regina looked strangely small. For the first time, Belle saw their embrace as being not of passion, but of need. That rage she had just encountered had been more genuine than Regina’s other tantrums. It had come from a real pain in her heart. And after her rage, Regina had turned to the other woman for comfort, for reassurance. For
love. And Maleficent was giving it.

As she had last night, Belle admired the peculiar affection these women had for each other. They were so in tune with each other’s needs and desires. Maleficent was so willing to make Regina happy, and Regina was so needful of Maleficent’s steadfast presence. They delighted in each other, and delighted in doing things together, even terrible things.

They would delight in doing terrible things to Belle.

“In case you couldn’t tell,” Maleficent said while Regina composed herself, “we’re going to hurt you tonight.

From the floor, Belle nodded. “I could tell.”

“But first,” Regina’s voice was clear and imperious, “you’re going to beg.”
“Beg for mercy?”
“Beg for dinner. Aren’t you hungry, child?” Regina was smiling now, her momentary emotions now either passed or hidden. She was a queen again, her regality a flawless mask.

Belle’s lips were dry. She was hungry. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast on the day of the party. That might as well have been a thousand years ago. “I am hungry,” she tried to make her voice sweet and pleading. “Will you please feed me, Your Majesty?”

Smirking, Regina waved her hand. The chains that bound Belle to the wall unwrapped from their hooks and moved in the air to wrap around the rafters of the bedchamber. It was a slow and awkward magic, nothing like how the cuffs forced her to hurry when Rumple gave her an order. The chains dragged in the air, and Belle had enough time to follow them at her own pace. She stood up and walked over to where Regina wanted her to be. There was enough slack in the chain that she was able to stand comfortably.

“If you’re going to beg, you have to do it on your knees, idiot. Grovel properly before a queen.”

Her eyes lowered, Belle sank to her knees. There was not enough slack for her to keep her hands down beside her, so Belle knelt with her arms raised over her head. It was similar to the posture they had put her in the day before in front of the mirror.

The mirror was still in the corner, reflecting her subjugation back to her. Belle tried not to look at it. What a mirror saw was not the truth. Rumple had said that, a long time ago.

Regina sat down at the little table in front of a meal fit for royalty. Maleficent sat with her, but did not touch the human food.

“Now,” the queen said. “I’m going to have a late luncheon, and you’re going to beg me for whatever I think you deserve. You may eat as much as you can get.” She took a long knife and expertly cut into a large roasted swan.

“Please,” Belle began at once. Rumple had never made her beg for food, but she knew a game when she played one. “I know I’m not worthy, but I’m so hungry, Your Majesty. It would be so good of you too--”

“Good?” Regina said with her mouth full. “Do you think I’m good?”

“I think you are glorious, Your Majesty. And magnanimous. Everything a queen should be! You have the power to be merciful, and kind, to take pity on this low creature who grovels at your feet.”
“I think she has you confused with someone else,” Maleficent chuckled.

Regina grinned at her lover and then looked over at Belle. She had eaten the meat off the swan’s wing and held the bones in her hands. “Do you know what I do to low creatures like you?”

Belle bit her lip. “No, Your Majesty.”

Regina’s smile turned grim as she broke the bones, snapping them in half. Then she tossed the pieces at Belle.

Only one piece of bone landed in range of where Belle could reach. And she almost had to break her arms as she stretched her body down to pick it off the floor with her mouth. There was no meat on the bone, only a bit of gristle and the dark marrow within. Belle took what nourishment she could, and spat out the rest onto the floor behind her.

She looked up at Regina. In the mirror, Belle could see her eyes--wide and innocent and pleading. The sort of lie Regina would want to see. “Gods bless Your Majesty, for your graciousness and your generosity.”

Regina snorted. “That’s a little over the top.”

It went on like that, begging and flattery and degradation. Regina threw food and Belle picked crumbs off the ground or licked splatters off her body or--more than once--caught pieces in mid-air like a trained dog. The acting didn’t bother her. It was pretending, like in one of Rumple’s games. At the end of it all, her stomach no longer gnawed with hunger.

Regina left the uneaten food and dirty dishes on the table. A servant would have to come and collect them later. The queens stood in front of Belle, their gazes sweeping over her naked body in all its misery and vulnerability.

“I don’t like the chains,” Maleficent said casually, as though she were talking about the style of a dress. “There’s nothing magical about them. Anybody can chain up a slave.”

Regina’s eyes flicked over her lover and she licked her lips. “Are you going to suggest something only you can do?”

“It’s not just me,” Maleficent demurred. “It’s a simple spell, I can teach it to you, my love. But, yes.” She brushed her hand over Belle’s cheek and cupped her chin. “We need to do something special for our Rumple’s little flower.”

The chains loosened and fell to the ground, bringing Belle down with their weight. She collapsed onto the floor and lay limp. She waited for them to do whatever they were going to do, waited for another order, or for more pain. With a flick of the wrist, Regina swept the chains away, back to where they had been hanging on the wall.

Belle was still manacled and collared, but nothing bound her to anything. Tentatively, she rolled her shoulders and stretched out her arms and legs. It seemed as though she could still move everything. She took a deep breath and waited.

Maleficent stood above her with her eyes closed and her hands extended. A green glow emanated around her, casting a noxious light over the dark room.

Just as Belle was about to ask what the sorceress was doing, she felt a sharp pain in her ankle. Looking down, Belle saw that her skin had been pierced by a black thorn the size of her smallest finger. A vine had grown up out of the stone floor and wrapped itself around her foot.
Belle’s breath caught in her throat as more shoots sprang out of the floor and grew into vines before her eyes. What terrible magic was this? The black plants grew under her and around her, wrapping around her arms and legs as though she were a trellis. Thorns covered the leafless vines, needle-sharp and merciless. They pressed into her skin and some cut through and drew blood. Hot tears pooled in Belle’s eyes and she ground her teeth to keep from crying out.

Vines wrapped around her arms and wrists and made her move with them as they grew. Her arms were forced behind her back, wrapped around a column of thicker branches that were bunched together like thatch. The vines at her legs moved her ankles behind the column as well, forcing her to open her thighs and expose her secret places.

Would they hurt her there? Belle couldn’t keep the thought from her mind. Earlier, they had torn out her hair and vandalized her body. Would they mutilate her as well? Would the black thorns press against her tender pink flesh? Would Maleficent make the vines grow up inside her? The thought made Belle tremble with fear—and with every move she made, the thorns pushed more deeply into the flesh of her back, flesh she had thought was beyond feeling any more pain.

The vines stayed away from her cunt. A thick branch roped around her neck above the collar to keep her head up. Another grew diagonally up her torso like a sash, crossing between her breasts. She had never known such pain, so complete and all-consuming. The vines still moved around her, the thorns a constant menace. She felt like she was being burned alive.

Vaguely, Belle recognized that in the back of her mind she was waiting for something. After another moment, she realized what it was: Peace. That was what usually happened when she was in pain. Usually, she felt the most wonderful, absurd sense of contentment. When Rumple beat her body, her mind and heart melted into something lovely and safe. She had been expecting that.

But there was no safety here. Rumple wasn’t hurting her, Maleficent was. And Rumple wasn’t going to pleasure her when this was over, they were going to fuck her. The queens had no interest in her safety or well-being. There were no rules here. Belle had no deal that protected her with them. Regina would not comfort her and hold her when it all became too much. These women would not allow her to ask a question to repay for what they had done to her.

Belle let out a ragged cry. “Stop!” Tears flowed freely down her cheeks and dropped onto her chest. The saltwater stung against her fresh wounds. “Please, Maleficent! No more!”

Through a haze of green magic, Maleficent opened her eyes. She took a moment to regard Belle, to look at her handiwork and the torture she had created.

She smiled.

“Our little bud thinks she’s had enough,” Maleficent remarked to Regina. “Do you agree, my darling?”

Regina shrugged. “You can stop if you want to. The work is already astounding.”

Maleficent preened. With a wave of her hand, the green light faded away. The pain that pierced Belle’s body became a little less, just enough for her to bear it.

Belle sobbed and tried her best to breathe. She was so utterly alone. All the familiar customs that marked her games with Rumpelstiltskin were gone. The queens were playing with her, but she was not playing along. She had no say in this torture, no protection, no escape. All she could do was breathe and count as a victory every moment she was alive.
Regina circled the thatch of thorns where Belle was bound. Her eyes traveled from the roots in the floor, over Belle’s exposed body and up to where the vines wrapped around the rafters. She reached for Maleficent. “You are amazing, my love. Your power, your skill, your bloodlust. Incredible.”

“You inspire me, my evil queen.” The two women embraced and kissed, clinging to each other possessively. Behind them, Belle closed her eyes and kept breathing.

“Go first,” Regina said when they broke apart. “You did all the work, you deserve to reap the rewards.”

“What a generous lover I have.” Maleficent’s hand lingered on Regina’s cheek even as she went over to the vines. Her face was still dreamy as she looked at Belle. “Have you ever licked a cunt before, whore?”

Belle blinked. The words were nothing new, but the abrupt change of tone made her pause. Had she ever licked a cunt? Was that what they would demand of her? What if she couldn’t do it?

“No,” she whimpered. “Never.”

“That’s hardly surprising. Does Rumple do it to you?”

“Yes,” Belle said, her voice still small.

“Now that is a surprise,” Regina smirked as she refilled her wine glass. “Most men would cut their tongues out of their heads before using them for a woman’s pleasure.”

“Well, Rumple always was a queer duck. But who are we to talk?” Maleficent chuckled and slipped her dressing gown off her shoulders. The gauzy fabric piled on the floor and Maleficent stood before Belle, naked as sin.

Every part of her was long and bony. Yellow waves of hair swept down her otherwise shaved body. Her breasts were even smaller than Belle’s—tight and pointed, with nipples so dark as to be almost black against her pale skin. Maleficent’s hands were large, with long, graceful fingers. Belle watched as those hands drifted leisurely over Maleficent’s body, from her neck to her torso to her hips to her smooth and hairless mound.

“Do you think I’m pretty, Belle? Do you like my body?”

“You’re beautiful,” Belle answered.

It was not a lie. Maleficent was striking and magnificent, the sort of creature that inspired awe and worship. She looked like a goddess, or a fiery succubus who wouldn’t think twice before slaughtering the unworthy. How could Belle be expected to satisfy such a force of nature?

“What a sweet thing to say,” she caressed Belle’s cheek. Despite her fear, Belle leaned in to the touch, taking comfort in the kindness, no matter how temporary it might be.

Behind them, Regina noisily flopped onto the couch. “Are you going to start, my love?”

“Yes,” Maleficent cooed. Still with her hand on Belle’s cheek, she leaned in and opened her mouth to kiss her.

This time, Belle knew to keep her mouth slack and loose. She closed her eyes and felt the heat of Maleficent’s face against her skin. As when she had been sleeping, the other woman’s tongue snaked into her mouth, but Belle didn’t fight it. Forcing herself to stay meek and compliant, Belle allowed
the kiss to happen. If she chose to let it happen, perhaps it wouldn’t feel so awful.

She didn’t realize she was being moved downward until her legs bent to touch the floor. The vines that ensnared her were lowering her to the ground. Maleficent bent to keep kissing her until Belle was at the level of Maleficent’s waist. Then, with a sudden jerk, Maleficent sucked Belle’s tongue from her lips and stood up, pressing her female parts against Belle’s open mouth.

It was only a reflex that made Belle try to dart away from this strange object, and even that unthinking effort was in vain. The vines kept Belle’s head exactly where Maleficent wanted it to be. Thorns pressed against the soft flesh of her neck, but they wouldn’t pierce her skin unless she moved away. She was unharmed, as long as she obeyed.

Belle had to focus on the folds of flesh that currently enveloped her face. She wanted to gag on it, to choke and pull back and take just one moment to acclimate herself. But Maleficent gave her no chance. Belle had to get to work.

Maleficent’s cunt was odd and overpowering, but Belle had no choice but to overcome her revulsion, and quickly. She had to pleasure this woman. Under Belle’s tongue, Maleficent was unpleasantly sour, with even more of a vinegary bite than Belle had tasted on herself. The scent of her was sharp and powerful. Belle could imagine it lingering on her body for days after this was done. Even when she was safe with Rumple again, she would smell Maleficent’s cunt in her nightmares.

It was nightmarish enough to be blinded, to have the whole of her consciousness submerged in a hot, close, moistness. Belle felt Maleficent’s folds against her skin, and she turned her head slowly to determine the dimensions of her new world. Yes, it was like the worst kind of dream--the sort where you cannot move but you must go forward, into the hellish blackness of the unknown. Carefully, Belle began to move her tongue, and then her lips, all over Maleficent’s cunt.

“I hope you’re a quick learner,” she said over Belle’s head. “I’ll make allowances for your innocence, but when you do this for my queen you’ll have to be perfect.”

Her mouth full, Belle nodded. She would have to do this to Regina as well. And Regina was a different type of monster altogether. Behind her closed eyes, Belle felt a surge of fresh tears. How was she going to do this? And how could she possibly do it well enough to please Regina?

Maleficent rocked her hips against her, rubbing herself against Belle’s nose and teeth. Belle moved her tongue in as pleasing a way she could manage, sticking it out and bobbing her head to keep up with Maleficent’s movements. Was that right? Did she like that?

Even though she could turn into a dragon, Maleficent’s anatomy was like Belle’s. With her lips and tongue, Belle mapped out folds of flesh and an interior passage and even a spot seemed to give Maleficent a sharp and singular pleasure.

“There! Yes!” she shrieked. The thorns clenched even tighter against Belle’s body. “Don’t move, you clever slut. Just stay there and keep licking.”

Belle broke away just long enough to take a breath, and then redoubled her efforts. She swirled her tongue everywhere it could reach and rubbed at Maleficent’s pleasure spot with her nose. Didn’t Rumple do it like that? Wasn’t that how he liked to make her come? But he was so much more practiced than Belle, and his nose was so much bigger. Could she do what he did? Would she be good enough to please Maleficent? Good enough to keep Regina from hurting her?

As her orgasm approached, Maleficent became more generous with her noises and her praise. Doing
her best to follow frantic instructions, Belle moved her mouth faster and rougher against Maleficent. Belle felt her clenching around her chin. The witch thrust her whole body against Belle’s head, pushing her into the thorns. Belle screamed in pain and the noise was muffled by Maleficent’s cunt.

But the vibrations—or the sound, or the pain that had produced it—finally pushed Maleficent over the edge.

In the blackness behind her closed eyes, Belle saw a wave of green light. A pulse of warm wetness gushed onto her face. But once Maleficent had stepped away and Belle could breathe through her nose again, the fragrance that greeted her was not the pungent brine of a woman’s orgasm.

It was roses.

Belle looked around at the thorns that held her in place. When Maleficent came, they had all burst into bloom. The thorns were still there, Belle still felt the pain all over her body. But she was also surrounded by flower blossoms. Every rose was full and perfect. Every rose was as red as blood.

In front of her, Maleficent pulled back. Even standing, her body was loose and relaxed. Her eyes were closed and lavender smoke wafted up from her mouth. Blearily, she staggered over to Regina and collapsed with her on the couch. Maleficent curled up and Belle saw her shudder and tremble in pleasure.

Regina held her naked lover against her robed chest. She stroked her blonde hair, and looked at Belle with a cold hatred.

A new fear twisted in Belle’s stomach. So far, Regina had burned hot—her anger coming out in spurts that were satisfied as soon as Belle submitted to the pain she inflicted. But now there was murder in the queen’s eyes. Not a thoughtless rage, but a calculating assessment of how Belle had offended her and how she would pay for it.

Still bound to the column of thorns, Belle summoned up all her bravery and looked the queen in the eye. “Did I please her well enough, Your Majesty? I want only to serve.”

“Shut up, you little bitch.” Again, Regina did not shout, she did not even command. Her voice had no more emotion than the cold steel of a knife in the darkness.

“Be nice,” Maleficent murmured from her place at Regina’s chest. “She did very well.”

With a tight smile, Regina lifted up Maleficent’s chin. “Will you be alright if I leave you to take my turn on her?”

“Of course.” Maleficent leaned back against the purple couch, her bony limbs loose and relaxed. “It’s a fun ride.”

“We’ll see how much fun I can have with her.” Regina stood and slipped off her purple dressing gown.

Belle noticed her breasts first. Astonishingly, the queen’s ample bosom was not the work of clever corsetry and flattering gowns. Even naked, she had the breasts of a statue or a painting—so impossibly round and perfect that Belle had never imagined a real woman could look like that. And it probably wasn’t magic either. Regina flaunted her body with too much thoughtless confidence for her beauty to be anything other than the luck of nature.

She was not so pale as Maleficent. And everywhere Maleficent’s body was made of straight lines, Regina had luscious curves. The queen stood with her hands on her round hips, her thighs spread
apart. Like Maleficent—and like Belle, now—the space between her legs was smooth and hairless. Belle looked, transfixed and terrified, at the part of Regina that it would be her task to satisfy.

Belle licked her lips as the queen approached, but before she could do anything else, Belle felt her hair being pulled back, her face being lifted up to Regina’s scrutiny. Mercifully, the thorns did not tighten around Belle’s throat. Did Regina choose not to use them? Or did she have no power over Maleficent’s magic?

She moved Belle with her hands, gripping her by the jaw as she caught every angle of her face. Belle could only take shallow, panicked breaths as the queen dug her nails into her flesh.

“You smell like her,” she whispered, her face contorted in anger. “Do you think you got anything by pleasuring her? Do you think it meant anything?”

“No,” Belle shook as she spoke. “Not unless you say it did, Your Majesty.”

“It didn’t,” Regina hissed. “You’re nothing! You don’t deserve to pleasure her—or me either! You’re not special! You’re not even good at being a whore! You’re just a collection of holes made for getting fucked! The Dark One only wants you to put his cock in you! Do you understand that?”

Regina began to laugh. “Do you even know what it means to be a woman in this world?” Her grip tightened on Belle’s throat. “It means getting fucked. Over and over and over until maybe, someday, you get to fuck back.”

Regina curled her lip in a grimace, and for the first time, Belle noticed a flaw in her perfect mask of beauty. There was a scar on her lip. It was faint and old and covered by cosmetics, but Belle could make it out just the same. Who had done that to this powerful woman? How long had the queen been marked by pain? What other wounds did Regina have, either visible or hidden?

How long would it be until she gave Belle just as many wounds as she had suffered?

With a grimace, Regina leaned toward Belle with her mouth open. But instead of a kiss—even a dominating, angry kiss—Belle felt the queen’s tongue on her cheek. Her stomach dropped as she realized Regina was licking her. She was licking Maleficent’s sour smell off of Belle’s face.

“You don’t deserve her,” Regina whispered. “You don’t deserve anything that’s happened to you.”

“I know that!” Belle blurted, then realized what she’d said. How could she be so stupid! Hastily, she corrected herself. “Your Majesty. I know I don’t deserve the honor of—”

“Shut up!” Regina snarled. “Use your mouth for something fucking worthwhile!” With that, she stood up and thrust her body against Belle’s face.

Regina kept one hand in Belle’s hair the whole time. She forced Belle’s head back and slammed her hips against her face over and over. The impact hurt and Belle didn’t understand how it didn’t hurt Regina. Was she immune to physical pain? Or was she so caught up in hurting Belle she didn’t feel how she was harming herself?

Regina gave Belle no control over the movements of her head. She barely had time or thought to move her tongue or her lips. All she could do was brace herself as Regina ground her body against Belle’s face.

Belle closed her eyes and let it happen. This was a nightmare that had no resolution, no goal to even be hoped for. This nightmare would be nothing but terror until she woke up.

This was nothing that Belle was doing, or even that she was being forced to do—it was being done to
her. Regina put for the effort. She thrust and grunted and ground herself into Belle over and over again. Too frightened to move, Belle froze her heart and let the queen work her will.

Regina tasted different than Maleficent. Her cunt had a strange darkness to it. Where Maleficent had been sour and underripe, Regina tasted almost sweet at first. But then there was a stomach-turning sensation of foulness—like an apple with a slimy, rotted core. Over and over, Belle was forced to delve into that core and taste that poison.

Suddenly, Regina backed away. Belle had only the time to take a single breath before she felt the slap. Regina’s hand was cold against her flushed cheek.

“Are you even trying?” Regina sneered. “Is this what Rumple wants from you? That you just lie back and think of ogres?” She slapped Belle again, and her cheek scraped against the thorns.

Belle tried to breathe. “I--” she panted, her breath coming in shallow and strange. “I--” She had no answer to give the queen. “I--” How did Regina know about the ogres?

“Oh, shut up, you stupid cow,” Regina said before she began her assault again. She straddled Belle’s head, her legs twisting over her shoulders. She gripped the thorny vines, knowing they wouldn’t dare hurt her. Then Regina pushed herself against Belle’s face back and forth, riding her like a horse.

Belle couldn’t breathe. Regina pressed Belle into her pleasure so tightly that there was no room for air. She couldn’t break away, not even for a moment. She tried to even turn her head, but Regina yanked her back into the position that she wanted. Belle tried to speak, to scream, but her words were lost in Regina’s flesh. Her arms were bound, she had no way to signal her distress.

And Regina didn’t care. The distress was the point. Belle could weep and struggle and scream, but the fact would remain: Belle wasn’t breathing because Regina didn’t want her to breathe. Her shoulders went limp as she realized how easy it would be for her to die this way, suffocating on a queen’s cunt.

Would Rumple let her die tonight? Did his deal with these evil women allow for them to kill her? The cuffs had saved her from drowning once. At his word, they had pulled her out of a briny darkness even more merciless than the one she was in now. And on the night of the party, the cuffs had made her defend herself against Regina, because of Rumple’s order. Would they save her now? Was there a power yet unknown to her that would keep her safe?

No. It was only luck that just as Belle slipped away into the blackness, Regina shifted her position. Now she was only on Belle’s mouth, and not her nose. Belle could breathe again, though the air was polluted by the stench of roses and evil pleasures.

She breathed, and felt tears stream down her cheeks. The tears mixed with Belle’s blood and saliva and Regina’s wetness on her face. What kind of potion could Rumple make from those ingredients?

Above her, Regina was still grinding away, seeking out a pleasure that Belle had no means to give. Through weary eyes, Belle watched the queen’s breasts bounce from the exertion. Her dark hair was loose and tousled. A sheen of sweat glistened on her lustrous skin. It really was a shame that such a gorgeous body belonged to such an ugly woman.

Finally, Regina grunted and jerked against Belle’s chin. She dismounted from Belle’s shoulders and pulled her out of the vines. Belle felt her skin rip as she was wrenched away from the thorns. Regina tossed her to the ground and Belle knelt with her head bowed.

“Are you satisfied, my darling?” Maleficent asked from the couch. She was stretched out with her
legs spread and her fingers idly fondling her hairless mound. “It was a good show.”

Regina poured herself another glass of wine. “That pitiful excuse for a cuntlicker isn’t going to satisfy me without help.”

“Poor thing.” Maleficent sat up and waved Belle over to her. “Come here, pretty princess.”

On her hands and knees, Belle crawled over to Maleficent as quickly as her wounds would allow. She didn’t get on the couch, but knelt and looked up at the sorceress.

Maleficent stroked Belle’s hair and petted her like a dog. Belle felt something warm and wet against her back. A cloth. It touched her skin and Belle hissed in fresh pain.

“It’s all right,” Maleficent said in a high-pitched, playful voice. “I’m just cleaning the blood off to make you pretty again.”

Warm water, fragrant with healing herbs, dripped over Belle’s tattered back. She let out a wordless whine and Maleficent cooed and offered her more comfort.

“Such a pretty girl,” she said. “And a good girl, too. With enough experience, you could be a very fine cuntlicker.”

Without quite understanding why she was doing it, Belle rubbed her face against Maleficent’s bare legs. In response, Maleficent kept washing Belle. She praised her and made sweet sounds as she ran her fingers through Belle’s hair and gently pulled apart her tangles. Through all of this, Belle breathed, and let herself be comforted.

A part of Belle didn’t want to be comforted. She knew that this sweetness was tainted. Maleficent had hurt her just as much as Regina, why should Belle accept anything from her? But Belle knew that she needed to take whatever healing was offered to her. She had played this game with Rumpelstiltskin often enough. He liked to make her relax after one strike, so the next one would hurt more. The queens were the same, only their strikes were so much worse and the time between them all too brief.

“Let’s get her on the bed,” Regina said after a few minutes. “It’s time to stop pussyfooting and have some real fun.”

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