Her Royal Highness

Posted originally on Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/17757515.

Rating: General Audiences
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings, No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: F/M
Relationship: Ben/Mal, Elsa (Disney)/Jack Frost (Guardians of Childhood) Hades & Mal (Disney), Hades/Maleficent (Disney), Audrey/Original Son of Hans Adam/Belle (Disney), Doug/Evie (Disney: Descendants)(mentioned), Jay/Lonnie (Mentioned), Jane/Carlos de Vil (mentioned), Mal & Maleficent (Disney), Audrey & Mal (Disney: Descendants), Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III/Astrid Hofferson, Pitch Black/Eris
Character: Ben (Disney: Descendants), Mal (Disney), Evie (Disney), Jay (Disney), Carlos de Vil, Evil Queen (Disney), Jafar (Disney), Maleficent (Disney), Cruella de Vil, Belle (Disney), Beast (Disney), Original Characters, Audrey (Disney: Descendants), Elsa (Disney), Fairy Godmother (Disney), Dizzy Tremaine, Anastasia Tremaine (Disney), Evelyn Deavor, Original child(ren), Jack Frost, Nicholas St. North, E. Aster Bunnymund, Pitch Black (Guardians of Childhood), Original Child(ren) of Maleficent (Disney), Original Child(ren) of Elsa (Disney), Original Child(ren) of Jafar - Character, Hades (Disney), Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, Astrid Hofferson, Original Children of Ben and Mal, Eris (Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas), Chad Charming


Part 1 of Descendants/Dreamworks Ultimate-verse

Published: 2019-02-12 Completed: 2019-12-31 Chapters: 52/52 Words: 471659

**Her Royal Highness**

by [WanderlustandFreedom](https://www.fanfiction.net/u/384859/WanderlustandFreedom)

**Summary**

The last chapter to Happily-Ever-After was supposed to be written with the End of War Manifesto that banished the villains from Auradon, but no one planned for Maleficent's Master Plan. Twenty-four years after the war is over, King Benjamin is about to ascend the
throne, but there's one major roadblock - a daughter of Maleficent who has been cursed to become Queen of the Isle of the Lost with him, or else. Now, Ben and Mal need to learn to work together to rule an increasing number of kingdoms, including an Auradon in uproar over a new Queen, an Ancient Kingdom desperate to survive, an Island that has been completely severed off of Auradon to fend for itself as a new country, and a massive war that has been going on for thirty years above their heads. Meanwhile, neither is sure of the other, their forced partner who may have all their best interests at heart or who may betray them at any time. Can they balance trust, duty, want and need? It's now or never. There is no time left. Updates on Wednesdays. Text spoilers posted every fifth chapter in closing notes.

Notes

Welcome to Her Royal Highness.

731 pages of romance, action, and drama. Updates on Wednesdays. every fifth chapter I'll post text spoilers.

Mal is the only person not aged up. everyone else is in their twenties.

Things you will read:
Swordfighting, Maleficent's death, Extreme Magic(including Mal breaking the barrier of the Isle of the Lost from the inside.), a wedding, Four kingdoms, a new city on the Isle of the Lost, new family members, legal drama, crossovers between every Disney Movie ever (And a genre that has never been told in this way so far) and lots of cute scenes.

How do I find foreshadowing?
Well, it's pretty easy, but there's a LOT to this story. Firstly, there will be general prophecies given in C8 that apply to the Entire Story, so you can always examine those. Secondly, any time Mal asks a question, it's usually referring to something that will have a lot of importance to the story. And I mean any time. In chapter 8 she asks about how no one catches the wedding garter after Audrey catches the bouquet, and that's foreshadowing for something that happens to Audrey. Anytime a character mentions how strange something is, it's foreshadowing, and on Ao3, extra spoilers are posted every fifth chapter. Also on Ao3 I update the tags a few days before I upload the next chapter, so if you glance through what I've added you can get clues to what's in the next chapter before it comes out.

You're going to love it. I can almost promise this. But I'm still going to say: I hope you guys like it.

See the end of the work for more notes
"What's a prologue?"

"It's a thing you do when you don't want the story to start at the beginning."

"That's pretty lame."

"I know."

"So, like, what do I put in it?"

"Well, usually it has things that tell you about what you're about to see. It helps readers know some of the rules of the place they're visiting and how things work. You can put history in it if you don't want your character to tell the reader that stuff."

"I don't."

"Well, now you know where to start."

"Okay. I think I'm ready. Just… let me know if I need to go back and fix anything."

"I will. Now, begin."

"Once upon a time, long, long ago…. Well, not that long ago, but – we were living in dark times. A new government was trying to emerge, with a ruling monarch at its center. The fighters at the front were the heroes, the people whose stories were those of being wronged and shunned, only to emerge victoriously and live a 'happily ever after', and the villains, who'd almost ruined that ending. And the heroes were fighting against the villains to lock them up.

"It was a bit ironic in hindsight. New villains emerged while fighting them off and horrible atrocities were committed in the name of trying to make the world good once and for all. Even after the war was over, twenty-two crimes that would be known as the Unspeakable Acts of Injustice were committed by the government against the villains. One of the villain's eyes was even poked out and dried to sit in a museum after the war, just so everyone could look at it and say: 'what a great thing this person did.' Or 'how wonderful is it that villains don't live among us anymore?'

"After all the fighting and gore was over, the heroes won. Which ones, no one was sure. But Side A was the victor, and so they rounded up all of Side B and booted them off to a remote, rugged island that later became known as the Isle of the Lost.

"One of the villains who was treated more roughly than the rest was a vile fae enchantress named Maleficent. Maleficent had been battered to and fro, stomped on quite literally, and had been ridiculed by the entire kingdom when Stephan, a former lover and the king of a higher nation in the land, burned off her wings for the second time in front of a crowd of people gathered at his castle. Not that anyone knew it was the second time.

"Her mistreatment was a symbol of a new age. There was to be a King and a throne to be passed down, and laws to keep the ruling family from having too much power. A good system, everyone thought. And somewhere along this line of thought, someone had the brilliant idea to keep sending people to the Isle of the Lost. The murderers and arsonists and thieves and the whole lot. Just… shut them out of society."
"That detail is important for later, but not right now."

"It's not good to address the readers."

"Yeah, but… It's my prologue, right?"

"Correct. Please proceed."

"Okay, so, Maleficent was filled with wrath. She vowed to one day have her revenge, even if she had to wait years for it. And she began to plot. The heroes were surprisingly forthcoming in information. They believed they had exploited every loophole in both banning the villains and restraining their magic, among other technical details. Maleficent managed to figure out a singular, very specific brand of blood magic that she knew would be able to bypass all their restrictions.

"The plot revolved around Brandwit's 117th law of magical genealogy, which states that curses can be inherited if unfulfilled, and Elvon's 12th theory of forced soulmates. So, here's the long and short of Maleficent's plot:

"She would be doomed to stay on the island unless she had a blood anchor. All other anchors would be rendered useless. The strongest form of an anchor out there was a soulmate, but these had ceased to exist several centuries ago with the extinction of dodo birds. Who knew those birds had actually been important? So, Maleficent needed to tie herself manually to someone in Auradon. Except Maleficent couldn't tie herself to Auradon since her heart had long ago been stolen and no one had ever bothered to give it back. (Cough, cough, Stephan.) Therefore, Maleficent created half of the curse based on the idea that she could have a child. The other half of the curse was placed upon the crown of the ruling queen of Auradon. The two halves correlated to each other and, done properly, would result in a near-unbreakable bond between the future heir of the throne and her own future heir.

"Phew. I know it's a lot, so here's what you need to know. Two halves of a curse. One on Maleficent, which her future son or daughter would automatically inherit and be forced to carry out in her place. The other half on the crown of Auradon's future queen, whomever she would become. This would bleed into the queen herself due to the rule of enchanted objects and would eventually be passed down onto the firstborn child, who, by the way, was a boy. The curse was spelled on a timer of thirty years before excruciating pain set in, and a whole list of 'if-thens'. One of the biggest conditions was that the magic of the crown would not hold unless Maleficent's daughter gained a certain amount of power over Auradon, specifically the Isle of the Lost. Basically, the young prince would never be able to be king unless he married Maleficent Jr to give her power over the barrier and its prisoners.

"Maleficent and the rest of the villains were forced onto the Isle and most magicks were cut off. Auradon elected King Adam and Queen Belle as the first rulers and after two years they welcomed a chubby boy with brazened skin and a growl when he snored. They named him Benjamin Florian Benson. Maleficent heard the news right away and began looking for the perfect throw-away to father a child to pass her part of the curse onto. She took her time, and it was another five years before she delivered a beauty of curious workmanship. A purple-haired, fair-skinned, almost-princess upon whom she conferred her name, Mal."

"And that's you?"

"Hush. I'm telling a story."

"When does it start?"
"Right now. Our story begins twenty-five years after Maleficent was first imprisoned. Right in the middle of the start."
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Mal's life is turned upside down when her mother reveals her plans to her and Ben fears his own uselessness when he can't be what he's always supposed to have been.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crown Prince Benjamin clipped his gold cuffs into place along his sleeves and took a few deep breaths. He was alone in his bedroom at the moment, which was a rarity these days as his father was preparing to confer the throne on him. There were five more months to go until his coronation, and he was feeling the weight of the world. He couldn't describe it quite yet, but there seemed to be this odd… pull in his chest.

Ben pulled at the lapels on his coat and studied the way the suit lined up with his frame. He glanced at the clock. His royal crown tests were due to begin in an hour. The bright Auradonian sun was shining through the four tall, slim windows that panned the far right side of his room, leading up to a small balcony with beautiful glass french doors. He was standing in front of a large mirror that rested on wheels so he could move it back into a closet when he was done. The room wasn't particularly large in area, but it was tall.

As Ben smoothed his hair down with a wet comb and many careful, even strokes, a gentle knock sounded and echoed inside the hollow door. "Ben?" His mother called from outside.

"You may enter," Ben called back as he examined his reflection and tried to slick his hair down more. A stream of water ran down his hairline past his ear and made him shiver.

Queen Belle opened the door and slipped inside. Ben caught a glimpse of her favorite yellow sundress as she closed the door behind her. The skirts were swishing around her calves as she twisted a handkerchief in her hands. Her hair was much shorter than it had been in her youth. She'd colored her hair a lighter shade back when he was still at Auradon Prep, but now it was fading back to its original brown shade, with soft streaks of grey here and there, making her look like a sophisticated businesswoman. She had soft laugh lines around her eyes and mouth and a small scar tucked away on her hairline from the war twenty-four years ago.

"Are you ready, sweetheart?" She asked, coming to stand beside him. She put her hands on his shoulders and smiled at their reflection in the mirror.

"Just about." Ben smiled. Belle smiled back at him, leaned up to kiss his cheek and walked over to sit on his bed. She ran a hand over the multi-colored threads of the bedspread and then turned to watch her son pull on his shiny black shoes and roll the collar of his white shirt down.

When he finished adding and fixing everything, he turned around to his mom for approval. Belle smiled at her son, dressed up in royal blues, and patted the bedside for him to sit down. He did so, and the weight of the mattress shifted suddenly in his direction.

"Nervous?" She whispered.
"A little," Ben admitted. He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. He thought of Auradon and everyone who lived there and almost buckled under the weight of his thoughts. Would he be a good ruler? Would he even be able to do anything? Sure, Auradon wasn't perfect, but his parents had already done so much... Ben swallowed. "It's a big responsibility." He hesitated as Belle's eyes flickered down to the ground and back up at him. "You okay?" Ben asked her. Belle sniffled a little.

"Yes." She wiped her eyes. Ben bit his cheek and waited for her to compose herself. After a few minutes, she did.

"I'm so, so proud of you. It's been almost twenty-one years but it feels like I've blinked and you've sprouted. You used to be able to fit in my arms, and now you're bigger and taller than I'll ever be." Belle's body was wracked with sobs as she tearfully examined her only son and favorite twenty-one-year-old. He truly was the pride and joy of her life. She reached forward and took his hands as she spoke.

"I want you to know that I'll always love you and be here for you. You can talk to me about anything and I'll listen and give you the best advice I can. You'll always be my little Benny-bop." The two chuckled together, and then Ben gathered his mom up into a big hug. Belle rested her chin on his shoulder as she tried to dry her tears and prevent them from getting onto his jacket. Her makeup was running down her cheeks.

"I love you, Mom," Ben whispered into her ear.

Belle hiccupped. "And I love you." She responded. Forty-four years ago, she'd been a tiny eighteen-year-old being held a prisoner in this palace. Now she was a queen who'd managed to stitch an entire country together after it had been torn apart by war for almost twenty years.

Ben and Belle broke away after several more minutes. Belle's face was blotchy and she was still hiccupping. Ben offered her his arm nonetheless and escorted her outside. Lumiere, the former candelabra, was waiting for them outside Ben's room. Lumiere had grey hair and walked with an odd gait from his knee surgery a few years ago. His skin was leathered over from years of sun and smiles, but he had retained his kind face and bright smile. Lumiere was almost seventy years old, but he served the royal family with all the energy and joy he had back when Belle and her father had first arrived. Maurice, of course, had hence been laid to rest in his hometown of Paris.

"Ah, mademoiselle!" Lumiere exclaimed. Ben waved him off with a fond look directed towards his mom. Lumiere came forward and took Belle's hand to pat it. "It seems like only yesterday he was just a tot, no?"

Belle nodded and sniffled as more pearlescent tears began to roll down her cheeks. Lumiere smiled and pulled his former charge into a hug. Belle obliged and wrapped her arms around him and buried her face into his chest as the tears came and burned her face. Lumiere put an arm tightly around Belle's shoulders and leaned his head onto her hair. Ben had already let go of his mother and now stepped back to watch his mom's old friend console her. After several long minutes, Lumiere readjusted the now lightly-sobbing Bell under his arm and began to lead her down the hall as she scrubbed at her face and tried to compose herself. They ended up dropping her off at her and the Beast's door at her request so she could go fix her makeup.

Lumiere brushed his suit off lightly. His left side was covered in watermarks and mascara stains.

"I hope that comes off," Ben commented with a sympathetic frown.

"It was for a good cause." Lumiere waved him off. They continued to walk outside, as Ben had
final checks to go through and a short press conference before he had to travel to the Fairy Godmother's office at Auradon Prep.

The trip down the bright tiled floors of Beasts' Castle was silent and did nothing to console Ben's mounting nerves. At the end of the trip, Lumiere stopped him outside the large wooden doors to talk with him for a few seconds.

"Are you ready?" He asked. The twenty-year-old shifted in his shoes and swallowed.

"I think so, I'm just nervous." He admitted. Ben wasn't as close to Lumiere as Belle was. Sure, he enjoyed his raucous energy and bright spirits, but he had much preferred talking to Chip before Chip had left to race horses in Cinderellasburg. Cogsworth had retired the moment he learned Adam was going to be king. Mrs. Potts had tragically passed away when Ben was about eleven, and it was not long after that Chip had severed his ties with the castle that had kept him ageless and trapped during his childhood. Nobody said much about it, especially King Adam, but Ben thinks they all knew on some semblance of a level that Chip had severe PTSD from all those years wondering if he'd have the chance to grow up. The man couldn't even touch a teacup while Ben knew him.

Lumiere smiled at the young man. "It has been an honor to watch you grow up." He said honestly. "I know you will do many amazing things for this kingdom." He patted Ben's shoulder and then stepped back and opened up the door. Ben let his eyes rest on the tan floor tiles before he took a deep breath and wandered out into the bright sunlight outside.

King Adam was waiting on the porch steps. Adam's hairline was receding and he stood with a hunch, just like he had when he was the beast. But as his son strode through the doors, he looked up, straightened his spine, and smiled.

"Suit good?" King Adam asked as Ben approached.

"Yeah, dad," Ben responded with a shrug. His dad clapped him on the shoulder. Ben smiled.

"We've decided to do Final Checks in Fairy Godmother's office at Auradon Prep. For now, let's meet the press." Adam told him. Ben let out a breath and nodded. Adam chuckled and put his arm around his son. "Don't be nervous. It'll all be okay."

They exchanged a small smile and then Ben took a final deep breath before he put on a soft smile and walked down towards the circular road in front of the castle. The carriage and the press were waiting for him. As he rounded a particularly high bush that guarded Belle's Rose Garden from sight, the press began to chatter loudly and some began to call out his name. By law, they were allowed no further than the road, which was considered public property.

"Ben!" One yelled. He had long, tan hair in a ponytail and wore a red lace choker. "What are some of your thoughts on receiving your coronation blessings?"

Ben paused at the edge of the group. They spread out. Photographers were trying to get better angles and reporters were trying to ask questions. One very large camera that was broadcasting live was being held steady above the heads of everyone else. He tried to not look directly into it.

"It's overwhelming." He told the reporter with the choker. "I'm blessed, you know, to have the kingdom trust me this much. I'm humbled by all your support."

"Do you have any plans should you not qualify to be the next king?" One very tall and curvy dark-skinned reporter asked. A pit of dread formed in Ben's chest. He swallowed.
"No." He said honestly. He didn't know what he would do. Politics and 'be the king the kingdom needs' were what he'd been raised on. If he couldn't be what he'd literally been born and raised to be, he didn't know how he'd recover from that failure. Still, he flashed a winning smile to the crowd and said: "Maybe I'll play tourney. You never know."

A couple people laughed. Ben dipped his head in modest embarrassment. "Um, guys, I have a few more minutes before my mom is ready and we have to leave..." He glanced cautiously over his shoulder. "What do you want to know?"

A million microphones suddenly filled his vision and a million voices resounded in his ears. Ben blinked. Dozens of lips were moving and all the words seemed incoherent and meaningless to him. As he tried desperately to pick out at least one of the many questions being thrown his way, he felt that pit of dread grow deeper and wider. He swallowed so hard that he almost choked and then felt his lips begin to form words.

Mal, to be fair, had never been quite sure of what her mother was cooking up. As she'd gotten older she'd learned two rules. 1.) Her mother was always scheming. 2.) Asking would grant her nothing. She was better off waiting for Maleficent to grow excited enough to tell her.

Her mother was unhinged, but then again, they all were a little. Maleficent was the sort of crazy that elicited breaking things, random laughter attacks, and days where she locked herself in her room to emerge hours later with fully drawn, nonsensical blueprints of a plan to escape the Isle that revolved around a silver bullet engraved with the name John Sterlock. But Maleficent was no closer to escape than she had been twenty-four years ago when they'd first been locked up. Everyone knew this.

The other thing about Maleficent's craziness was that it made her extremely dangerous. Even without her magic, no one dared cross her. While many of the larger villains did nothing but poke fun at the small-time murderers and terrorists that were sent to the Isle, Maleficent had once strangled one with her bare hands after he'd tried to jump her in an alleyway. Everyone knew she'd be more than willing to do it again.

Mal's plans that day had involved graffiti on the south side bridge towards the forest, stealing a few swords from Uma and her gang, and having a friendly sword fight with Jay. He'd kick her butt, but she'd be learning more of his moves anyways. He couldn't stay ahead forever, could he? However, before she, Evie, Jay, and Carlos could high-tail it out of their home, Maleficent had entered the room singing praises to the day and demanding everyone sit down in front of the broken little TV screen. The parents took their seats, grumbling all the way, on the moth-eaten couch, and the children had sat far enough away that they couldn't be touched. Each had a decent view of the fuzzy picture being streamed from Auradon. Mal had grabbed a chair after a few minutes and sat chewing on her tangled hair with her legs splayed out and tracing the foreboding cracks in the ceiling with her eyes as a gleeful Maleficent thumbed through the channels.

So much for her plans.

Maleficent shouted in joy again. Mal looked lazily over and saw the young crown prince on the screen. His head was ducked down a little and he was smiling shyly. People were interviewing him, but the sound was fading in and out.

"What's this?" Cruella De Vil asked with narrowed eyes. "You hauled us over here to watch the royals?"
"Hush," Maleficent commanded. "This is a very important day. This is the day when all our dreams will begin to come true. We are going to get off this island!" She raised her fist high in triumph, and Mal immediately knew there was no way to stop this. She put her head in her hands and rolled her eyes as she watched the screen, completely bored.

"I see," Cruella said, fluffing her cowl around her neck. "And how is this-" she waved her hand at the screen "-going to get us off the Isle?"

Maleficent curled her clawed hands over the seat as she grinned wickedly at the screen. "Today is a special day. The new king is going to undergo his crown tests today." She snickered lightly, which turned into a laugh. Everyone looked away as she began to fall apart, sinking to the floor as she was caught in another unpreventable laughing storm. Mal tried to block out the sounds of her half-laughing, half-choking mother as she watched the rich little prince climb in his carriage and leave on-screen.

Again, so much for her plans.

"So, Ben," Fairy Godmother began as she shuffled papers around on her desk. "Let's see if you did your homework. What is this meeting for?"

Ben straightened up a little at being addressed. He was sitting in a blue-furnished chair in Fairy Godmother's headmistress office at Auradon Prep. It was strange for him to be on campus again after all these years. "Preliminary checks leading up to me receiving the throne. You'll check my health on multiple fronts, erase or subdue all magic spells and enchantments, ensure my alignment to good and also make sure you have the measurements of my head for crown resizing." Ben recited. He began to drum his hand nervously on his knees before both Belle and Adam reached over at the exact same time to stop the annoying sound.

"Correct." Fairy Godmother nodded as she pulled a lightly blue-tinted paper out of her stack. "What happens if you fail any of the tests?"

Ben gulped. "Well, I probably won't be king." He bit his lip and looked on, wracked with nerves. Fairy Godmother nodded and gestured for him to continue.

"Umm." Ben trailed off. "If I fail the health tests, the kingdom will have to vote on whether or not they want me to rule. If I fail the spells and enchantments portion, which is hard to do, we'll examine the contents of the pertinent spell and move from there. If the spell will hinder or prevent me from becoming king, then I won't be able to ascend the throne. If I fail the goodness test, depending on where I lay on the scale, I could be denied the throne or in worst-case scenarios be sent to the Isle of the Lost for active conspiration." Ben took a deep breath to calm his nerves and found his throat was very dry. He rubbed his sweaty palms against a handkerchief. "The stakes have never been higher." He murmured sarcastically to the room. Everyone laughed.

"Good. Now, we do health checks first, then goodness checks, and finally, curse checks. Can you tell me why that is?" Fairy Godmother asked as she picked up a swath of pens and put them in a mug from the pottery class on her desk.

"It's a level system. First, you need to know if I'm able to rule the kingdom, then you need to know if I'll do it right, and finally, will I be in control of myself as I do so?" Ben explained. Fairy Godmother gave a small, quiet clap. Ben let out a sigh of relief. The schoolmistress sat behind her desk and slid her mug of pens and pencils towards Ben.
"Let's begin." She said and placed the blue paper in front of him. There were five lines upon it. She withdrew her wand, which had been taken from the museum of culture for the occasion, from an otherwise empty slot in her desk and placed it on the desk within sight of the others. She then laid a finger on the handle part. Ben leaned forward and placed a finger on the tip. The wand was only a decorative prelude to the actual tests that would ensure his honesty.

"Benjamin Florian Benson. We meet here today to discuss the future of the country of Auradon, which is your right by birth to rule. Do you agree to take the proceedings of this meeting seriously?" Fairy Godmother asked.

"I do," Ben whispered.

"And do you," Fairy Godmother continued, looking very serious "-understand the risks involved with taking these tests today?"

"I do," Ben repeated. Fairy Godmother removed her finger and Ben pulled his back as if he'd been shocked. Fairy Godmother put the wand back into the desk, as its purpose had been fulfilled.

"You may sign on the first line." The Fairy Godmother told him. "Please include the date at the end of the line."

Ben numbly reached for a pen and used his best cursive to elegantly sign the first line. As requested, he listed the date. Once he finished, he looked up at the Fairy Godmother for additional instructions. She smiled. "Please sign the second line in black ink." She told him. Ben checked the color of the ink he'd just written in, and then signed the second line. As an afterthought, he included the date. The ink on the second line sank back into the paper, then reappeared a deep blue color. Ben heard Belle exhale behind him.

"Congratulations." Fairy Godmother told Ben. "You have passed the health test."

Ben sighed in relief. Fairy Godmother laughed at him. She gestured back to the paper. "Please sign the exact same way on the third line."

Ben began to bite his cheek as he carefully wrote his name down. Once again, the ink sank back into the page and then reappeared a brazened blue. Belle chuckled. "What a surprise." She said. The lighthearted comment helped Ben to relax. Of course, he'd known he wasn't evil, but these tests were nerve-wracking, making him doubt everything about himself.

Fairy Godmother stood up with a smile. "Before the final test, I have to perform a quick spell that will disable any jinxes, spells, or enchantments that may be on him. That's why the last test is so hard to fail. Everything is already removed. After this, it will be your responsibility to recognize when you are being spelled or enchanted." Ben nodded.

Belle and Adam rearranged their chairs as Fairy Godmother came to stand behind Ben. She put her hands on his shoulders and everyone bowed their heads and closed their eyes as if in prayer. Fairy Godmother spoke aloud.

"By the power invested in me by the Kingdom of Auradon and as a member of the fae, I hereby remove all traces of magic, sans your familial blessings, for the purpose of preparing you for the crown." Fairy Godmother rehearsed.

Short and simple. Ben hadn't even had time to fidget once. He looked up as Fairy Godmother moved back to her chair. "You may sign." She told him as she sat down. Ben picked up the pen and wrote his name down on the fourth line. It sank back into the page and reemerged. This time
though, it was red.

A terrible ice-cold froze him. He heard his parents making noises but couldn't decipher them. Fairy Godmother reached for the paper with a deep frown and then turned to Ben with an analytical eye.

"There must be a spell on you." She said blatantly.

Ben tried to swallow. "What kind?" He rasped.

Fairy Godmother opened another compartment in her desk and pulled out a jewel. "Hold this in your palm." She instructed him. He took it and held it so she could read the surface of the jewel. She retrieved a pen and paper and then prodded the jewel with her finger. It began immediately to change colors. Fairy Godmother wrote down each one like a secret code and then left Ben to hold the stone after it had stopped changing colors as she deciphered the string of intensely specific colors.

Finally, she looked up with a sorrowful eye.

"A blood anchor." She responded. "Someone has turned Ben into a blood anchor. It's an extremely complex and powerful curse. I wouldn't be able to erase it without a team of people to help me, lots of time, the source, and the other half."

"The other half?" Belle asked. Ben was glad she was asking because he couldn't think anymore. He began to bite his cheek to try and bring feeling back into it.

"This curse isn't the full curse. There's one other half with a very specific signature. We could find it easily. In fact, I suspect that was their goal. There's also a very long list of what-ifs. A few of them include safe blocks to prevent the magic of the crown from sticking and a severe pain wave that will start in a few years. You're lucky you weren't born three years later than you were, otherwise you'd be in the hospital now from the severe shocks this creator has spelled onto you."

Ben felt King Adam put a hand on his shoulder. "Son? Have you been to any place where you can remember holes in your memory, or-"

"That wouldn't be it, Adam." Fairy Godmother interrupted. "It's an inherited curse. There's a very clear line of passing. The curse was placed on the queen's crown, probably after we blessed it. Maybe after you two were elected king and queen. It must have sunken into Belle and then passed onto Ben."

The room felt very stifling. Ben tried to speak. "Will it- can I still be-"

"I don't know." The Fairy Godmother said quietly. "Unfortunately, I will need to find the other half before anything else, and then we will have to speak again." She picked up the piece of paper and turned it face down. Ben felt like crying.

"The tests have been temporarily adjourned until further notice. Go home, Ben. I'll be in contact shortly." She said, and then stood to open the doors of her office. The royal family walked out. No one said anything and the three made sure they weren't so much as even touching. When they walked off the school premises of Auradon Prep, where Fairy Godmother worked, they were immediately bombarded by the press. King Adam gave a short statement as he and Belle tried to guide their downtrodden son into a nearby waiting carriage. Once inside, Ben took off his cuffs, unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt, and messed up his hair. Everything was ruined. He felt like his entire life was in shambles as they began to roll away, back to Beast's Castle.
Almost two hours had gone by since Maleficent had sat everyone down in front of the TV. No one was allowed to leave, but Maleficent was the only one who remained fixated on the screen. Everyone else had drifted away. Jay, Jafar, and Carlos were playing a card game that Jay was winning, Cruella was talking to her stuffed dog, and EQ and Evie were criticizing girls in magazines from Auradon. While Evie was looking at several different girls, Mal noticed most of EQ's were actually of Snow White. Typical. She herself had picked up a dog-eared book and begun to skim the pages as her mother took in even the commercial breaks with anticipation.

The news station's jingle was heard for the millionth time and Maleficent shouted for quiet even though that was all that existed in the room. Mal glanced up to see the prince of Auradon being led through a crowd with his parents. She rolled her eyes. She couldn't understand her mother's obsession with the prince today. Surely he couldn't be their ticket out of here?

An irritating female voice began to announce the screen. "Prince Ben has just emerged from his meeting with Fairy Godmother, and goodness! He doesn't look like it went too well! Here's a statement made by his father, current King Adam, as they left the scene:"

The screen cut and revealed the slim, middle-aged King. Mal slid her book down a little to stare animatedly at the screen. "Everything is in order," Adam said. "Ben is in perfect health and Fairy Godmother clearly approves of him. We ran into some unexpected, unfortunate bumps in the road, but they are expected to be resolved by this time tomorrow."

The News station picked back up with: "With the head families' assurance that everything can be resolved, we can only assume that something went wrong with the spells and enchantments portion of Ben's check. This could be anything from-"

"Yes!" Maleficent howled. The sound was so loud it jostled Mal right out of her stupor. "We've done it, we've done it, we've done it!" Maleficent screamed. Everyone stared.

"Done what, exactly?" The Evil Queen asked as she held up a picture of Snow White to glare at.

"My plan is coming together!" Maleficent triumphed.

"What plan?" Cruella asked with a roll of her eyes. Maleficent ignored her and instead turned to her daughter. Mal shifted her weight uncomfortably as her mother's gaze fell upon her.

"Oh, Mal!" Maleficent trilled. "The first part of the plan is a success! Now we can begin plotting stage two! The first half of the curse has almost certainly been found in poor prince Ben." Her Mom's lips formed a crooked pout as she approached the sixteen-year-old. "Now's your time to shine!" She said with a flourish of her hand.

"What curse?" Mal couldn't help blurring out. She almost winced, but then Maleficent opened her mouth to laugh. For a second, Mal thought Maleficent was about to dissolve into another coughing fit, but then her mom continued talking.

"Before I came to the Isle I cursed myself, and the crown! A rather fancy curse, one of my best if I do say so myself. Of course, enchantments don't stick the best to objects, so they bleed, and then the queen got the curse and passed it onto her little rat. They're two halves of an anchor. You have the other half!" Mal's mouth dropped open.

"What? Mom!" She gasped.

"I know!" Maleficent cheered, clearly unaware of how shocked Mal was. "Now all you have to do is go to Auradon, marry the prince, and-"
"Marry the prince?" Mal protested. "What on earth? Auradon?"

"Why, yes, dear," Maleficent said, blinking several times. The rest of the room was staring. Evie, Jay, and Carlos's eyes were growing wider and wider. "Part of the curse prevents Ben from becoming King unless you get power over the Isle. He'd have to make you a ruler of Auradon in order to sever any of his own control over the Isle. The only way to do that without abdicating the entire throne is a marriage. That will make you Queen. Once you have say over the barrier around the Isle, you can command the Fairy Godmother to bring it down, and together, we will pillage Auradon together." Maleficent drew a clawed hand down Mal's cheek and then danced around in the space in front of Mal.

"And you're just telling me this now?" Mal shrieked, hyperaware that her voice was beginning to crack. "What if I don't want to marry a king?"

Maleficent shrugged. "It never came up before." She turned back to the TV, which had gone onto a commercial break, with a satisfied smile.

"You sold me!" Mal said accusingly. She balled up her fists and prepared to shout some more, but Maleficent had shut off. She was humming a song as she brushed the dust off her beloved TV set. Mal bit a small hole in her cheek and then stormed out towards the door. She grabbed her jacket and slammed the door behind her before she raced down the steps. As she left the building, she heard Maleficent call from three stories up: "Be back before dark! You need to be ready to leave!"

It was all Mal could do to keep from turning and glaring a hole through her mother. She raced away as fast as her legs would carry her and disappeared onto the Isle.

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Someone knocked on Ben's door late that night.

"Come in," Ben said wearily. The room's lights were set to low and he was lying on his bed with the covers and pillows on the floor around him. He was twisting paper into shreds in his hands as he stared out the windows and into the night.

The knob clicked and the door opened. Lumiere poked his head in. "Your presence is required in the library." He told the prince.

Ben sighed and stood up. "Thank you, Lumiere." He told the man holding the door for him. The two immediately split up after that, Ben going one way and Lumiere going the other. The only sound Ben had to keep him company as he walked was the scuff of his shoes. He made it to the library after about five minutes and found his parents and the Fairy Godmother sitting around a table, waiting for him.

"Fairy Godmother." Ben blurted out. He suddenly became very self-conscious of his appearance and flushed as he twisted his hands.

Fairy Godmother smiled and said: "It's been a rough day, hasn't it?" Ben nodded. "Let's get this over with then." She smiled and gestured for him to sit down. He did so, and she took a deep breath. "I can't remove the curse, but I did manage to map out most of it. It's one of Maleficent's, and it's tied to her only daughter."

"Maleficent?" Belle asked quietly. Adam reached over to take her hand. Ben put his head in his hands. Maleficent, the evilest fae in the world. That was it. He was done. He was never going to be able to become king.
"The spell appears to be setting the young girl up to be the queen. Many different parts of the spell are dictating She has to have absolute power over the Isle of the Lost or the magic of the crown will cease to stick after one hour. Of course, if she becomes queen, she'll free the villains on the Isle." Fairy Godmother explained.

"We can't just make her a queen," Adam growled. "There are laws. We'd have to abdicate the entire throne or-" He spread his arms wide and balled his fists up.

"Or Ben would have to wed her so she'd have partial power." Fairy Godmother nodded. "There's more. Once the spell is thirty years' old, both participants will be in excruciating pain. At thirty-five, they'll die. That starts in six years."

Ben pushed his hands through his hair several times. Somewhere on the Isle of the Lost, he was sure, someone was laughing. "What are the options?" He asked.

"You could technically reapply the coronation spells every hour, but that would be tedious and after so many tries they wouldn't be applicable anymore." Fairy Godmother sighed. "You can't rule without the spells because they give you mental connections to the state of the borders and give you the power to create magically-applicable laws. Very important. The second option is you could not be king, but you'll still die at thirty-five if we do either of those."

Ben sighed.

"Or-" The Fairy Godmother continued. "You could bring her over here and marry her, then become king as normal. We'd just have to figure out a safety plan to ensure she doesn't tear Auradon apart."

Ben lifted his head out of his hands. "I'm- I'm still eligible?" He asked.

The Fairy Godmother nodded. "Technically, a queen or king's power can be limited due to circumstance. And a wife wouldn't prevent you from ruling."

A great relief washed over Ben. He considered what he had just been told and came to a conclusion. Really, it was the only conclusion.

"I guess… we'll have to bring her over and see if we can make this mess work." He said slowly.

The Fairy Godmother nodded solemnly and smoothed her blue dress out a bit. "I agree." She whispered.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, The Little Mermaid, 101 Dalmatians, Aladdin, Disney, or any of the characters mentioned therein.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Auradon appears to snatch Mal from her home. She meets Ben and the Royal Family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mal spent the rest of the day hiding far from home. The last few hours, in particular, were under the bridge she'd planned to vandalize that morning. In between the steel supports for the bridge was a small hole about twice the diameter of a car tire. It grew narrower the further back it receded and was about two and a half feet deep. The end of the hole was rounded so if she tucked her legs up she could fit snugly into the dirt. When passersby walked above her, their footsteps would shake the dust from above her. She could hear snippets of conversation float down. Mal had wondered vaguely at first if she'd hear Jay, Carlos, or Evie walk above her, but so far, she hadn't heard anything.

In the dark, Mal chewed on her hair, a nasty habit of hers she'd started a few years ago, and twiddled her fingers around each other as she fumed. She was so mad she couldn't even think. All her life she'd wanted two things: freedom, and her mom's support. Mal wasn't even allowed to use her mother's full name since she wasn't evil enough. And truth be told, Mal didn't know if she'd ever be evil enough. Ever since her failed plot to force Evie to sleep for 1000 years back when she was twelve and Evie was sixteen, she'd known there was something different in her that set her apart from everyone else on the Isle. Something she didn't particularly enjoy, that made her more attached to her gang members as more than just pawns and that kept her up at night listing all the things she could change if only she would be given the chance. She just wasn't sure what to call it.

At twilight, the dirty river started to smell different as the temperature outside began to drop a little. Pollution in the air underneath the barrier caused extreme temperature changes on ground level. She turned her head to watch the light levels change over time. There was dirt down the back of her jacket and in her hair and in her shoes. She wondered if her mother was right and if there might already be palace guards surrounding their house, ready to execute her to free the prince from any blood obligations. On that note, she had no idea how the palace would react. Did they still do the death row? That seemed awfully dark for a country full of heroes. Then again, they did imprison everyone who didn't fit into society onto an island for them to battle it out amongst themselves. They didn't seem overly concerned for any children on the Isle, even though she knew many of them were recorded with, recognized and noticed by the crown.

The shadows under the bridge grew sharper and Mal began to uncurl herself. She crawled through the small hole and grabbed the underside of the bridge to haul herself out the rest of the way and then swing her body up. She grabbed the rusty railing and pulled a numb leg up. She couldn't feel her entire lower back. Once she wasn't dangling up above the smelly water, she stretched her arms up above her head and arched her back.

Mal took her time going home. After all, the sooner she went home, the sooner she'd have to face the idea that her life was about to either change forever or end entirely. And that wasn't an easy pill to swallow. She took the back ways home and soon found herself raising a hand to twist the
doorknob when a thought occurred to her.

Her mother was delusional, after all. There may be a likelihood that she had simply made up cursing the prince and whatever had actually happened in Ben’s interview with the Fairy Godmother was a fluke completely unrelated to a curse. Maybe, despite what the palace had said, Prince Benjamin was sick? After all, how could Maleficent have cursed the crown when she was sent to the Isle months before Belle and Adam had ascended the throne?

Mal twisted the doorknob and entered. Everyone in the room looked up at her. She stopped momentarily at the attention, then did her best to draw a half-lidded, bored sort of blank stare. Evie, Jay, and Carlos all rose to their feet at once, and that’s when Mal noticed all her things had been packed into a ragged purple suitcase and her one-strapped backpack. The sight chilled her more than she could admit. She wondered who’d done that.

"M?" Evie asked. Mal's eyes shot back to her and took in the concern in her blue-haired friend, who wore a blue t-shirt and a blue plaid skirt.

"Sup," Mal said. She looked away from Jay and Carlos and instead turned to examine her dirt-clogged nails.

"Stomp your feet off." The Evil Queen said softly. None of the villains were meeting her eyes. Mal felt a heavy weight fall on her shoulders. They thought Maleficent was serious. The back of her throat grew hot as Mal began to feel angry. This wasn't fair. Maleficent had no proof of what she'd done… yet.

Mal stomped her feet off and brown dirt fluttered out of her hair and jacket. She scowled and shook her head. "I'm going to go change." She snapped and stormed past Evie.

"Your clothes are down here," Jay called after her. Mal stopped mid-march, turned on her heel, unzipped her suitcase and pulled an outfit out before she began to march straight upstairs. No one called after her.

Upstairs, she shook all the dust out of her clothes and hair. She rinsed her hands off in cold water and then got re-dressed in a new, not dirty outfit.

She stalked down the stairs quietly and paused to listen outside the room everyone else was still in. There were whispers, but they were too low to make out. No one was stupid enough to let their voices carry in the room. She walked around the corner and observed the scene before her. Everyone was whispering amongst their parents in separate little groups of two. She walked over to the dining table and took a seat on it, whipping a chair around with her foot to use as a footrest.

"Where's my mom?" She asked Jafar, who was closest.

He wouldn't meet her eyes either.

"Napping," Cruella answered for him. Evie took a seat at the table.

"Mal," She started. "What's going on?"

Mal rolled her eyes. 'I'm gonna be honest, I think it was a fluke. I mean, how could mom have cursed the crown when all the heroes were keeping an eye on her? And why didn't they find the curse twenty years ago when he was born?' She shrugged. "She may have just imagined cursing it. Mom's a little wonky anyway."

Carlos and Evie were nodding along to her words, but everyone else remained still. The muscles in
Jay's arms were taut. Mal knew he was worried, but it wasn't as if he could tell her that with the villains so close by. Jay was the oldest partner of the four. He'd been with her since the beginning.

The thing was, this whole mess could really swing both ways. Maleficent could have dreamed it all up. Or, this could have been her backup plan all along. There was no way to tell until the palace themselves confirmed or denied it. But Mal didn't want to believe it.

She was her mom's daughter, a villainess. They wouldn't toss her out to the heroes, right?

"Besides," She started up again, her voice growing bolder and bolder. "Mom wouldn't sell me out like that. She needs me here to keep everyone in check. And she cares about me, in her own crazy way. Mom wouldn't just throw me out."

A loud and harsh knock echoed around the room. Everyone's eyes shot to the door. It was only a knock, but with such strength that it sounded like someone was trying to break in. Mal's throat went dry and doubts began to form in the back of her mind, but she quickly swept them away.

Maleficent appeared at the top of the creaky spiral staircase, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "Answer the door!" She hollered. Carlos jumped towards the entryway and undid the bolt before he turned the handle. The door knocked against the wall with a rattle and a clang. Outside was a tall man with a neat orange mustache who was dressed in royal blues and another man, equally tall, with dark sunglasses.

"Evening son." He directed this at Carlos. "May I please step inside?" Carlos wilted away from the tall man and his hard, angry eyes. Evil Queen, Jafar, and Cruella all stood to stare at the man. Mal felt her heart slow down and began to panic as the man ducked under the frame of the door and came to stand in front of the table. A gun rested on his hip and the floorboards shook when he stepped. His accomplice followed him into the room with his hands stuffed deep into his pockets. Outside, more soldiers were standing. Mal stared at them with wide eyes as the edge of the table broke off under her vice-like grip. Maleficent cackled in excitement as she hurried across the floor. Thump, thump, thump, across the floorboards. Hopefully, the neighbors wouldn't mind.

"Glorious! I was expecting you here tomorrow, but tonight will do." She pushed through her villainous counterparts and spread her arms wide as if welcoming the strangers to their very small apartment. The man only glared.

"Maleficent," He spat. "I am here to collect your daughter by order of the crown." The man's eyes darted to eye up both Evie and Mal, as if to see which one she was. It was dreadfully obvious, as Evie had an apple charm in her hair and the back of her shirt was inscribed with 'The Fairest of Them All'. The man stared at Mal with contempt.

"Yes, of course, of course!" Maleficent sang as she walked around Mal and put her hands on her shoulders. She kicked Mal's footstool out from under her as she walked past and Mal almost fell forward in shock. "Here she is, right here, and her things are over there." Maleficent took a hand from Mal's shoulder momentarily to point towards Mal's still open suitcase before she went back to holding onto Mal's shoulders. Mal suspected her mom thought she would run. Instead, she felt like she was going to throw up.

The man in sunglasses frowned and examined her. Mal's lower lip quivered. He took the shades off. He had dark brown hair and an oblong face shape. Clean-shaven, but with neat sideburns. He seemed to be a second-in-command of some sort.

"Lovely." The red-head spat. He snapped his fingers and a man emerged from the hall in the same uniform, but with less insignia. He went and picked up Mal's backpack and suitcase, pausing only
to zip her suitcase up. They obviously were not very heavy to him. Maleficent pushed Mal off of the table and spun her around. She kissed both of Mal's cheeks with sickening joy.

"Bye, sweetie!" She cheered and shoved Mal forward. Mal stumbled through Jafar and Evie and stared at the imposing man in front of her. He glared down his nose at her. Evie hugged Mal from behind, and Mal became aware that Evie's face was very wet as the taller girl buried her face in Mal's shoulder and sniffled once before leaning back. Jay hugged her too, but Mal was too numb to hug him back. She could scarcely remember to wrap her arms around Carlos before the white-haired kid stepped back.

The guards stood stone-still and looked around. "Any other goodbyes?" The second-in-command asked. No one moved. After a few seconds, the two men moved forward and planted their hands on Mal's arms. One on each elbow, one on each shoulder. They began to march her to the door. Mal whipped her head around and called: "Mom." The guards didn't stop, and Maleficent only waved with a sickeningly sweet smile on her lips. "Bring home the gold!" She crooned, holding up two fingers to her eyes and making a motion like she was watching Mal. Soon, they'd walked out the door and out of sight of her mom. Maleficent held up two fingers to her eyes and made a motion like she was watching Mal. She crooned, "Bring home the gold!" She left the room and stood at the doorway. Mal felt more like facing the ground than looking at the world around her. Her chin felt heavy as she internally begged herself to keep a stiff upper lip.

They marched her down to the area in front of her house, where two pristine white limos were waiting atop the broken street. People had gathered in the square and were shocked to see Maleficent's daughter, pale-white with fright, being led to the vehicle. Mal's head whipped around to stare up at her home, and she watched as the now seven residents looked back at her with stony expressions. Evie was trying to stay her tears without touching her face and ruining her makeup. Carlos was trying to not cry. Dark shadows covered Jay's face so much should couldn't read his expression. Her mother looked gleeful. Mal set her jaw so her teeth wouldn't clatter together.

One soldier with a large gun stepped inside the first one as everyone headed towards the second. It was clear they had all expected a little more of a fight. The two guards holding her shoved her into the limo and the door locked from the outside. A deep, closed-in feeling settled around her chest. At the same time, it felt like a knife had cut the skin above her ribs. Not enough to draw blood, but only to sting. That's when she realized that this must be what betrayal feels like.

The soldier sat on the opposite side of the limo with his gun held at the ready. His finger was braced over the safety switch. Mal swallowed, sank back into the seat, and did her best to ignore him as she heard the sounds of car doors closing. The car began to move. Mal imagined she could hear her mother's cackle and clenched her fists. If wishes came true in Auradon, Mal swore on her name that her one wish would be revenge on her mother for this horrid plot.

They hauled her out of the car to stay in some ruddy hotel overnight. Apparently, Auradon city was much further away than it looked from the Isle. Mal didn't see the two commanders, but the soldier company escorted her in and out. Mal fiddled around in the back of the car and nibbled on some candies they had back there because she was sure she was going to starve to death before they let her actually meet the royal family. Finally, she figured out how to roll down the little screen that separated her and the guards in front who were driving. There were only two. The second car was in front of them.

"Hey." Mal drawled in an exhausted tone, leaning into the driver's compartment a tad. "How long
does this trip last?"

For a moment, they both ignored her, and then the man in the passenger seat sighed and turned around to face her a little. It was the dark-haired man with the sunglasses. "It's only a two-hour trip from the Isle to Auradon. But the gates to the palace close at nine and open at seven. Safety reasons. We were sent out at six-thirty to get you. They were closed before we got off the Isle. That's why we stopped for the night. We'll be at Beast Castle's Gates in about 15 minutes."

"15 minutes?" Mal asked, alarmed.

The man nodded. He observed her panic with a curious look, so she quickly masked her expression. "That means less than thirty minutes before we meet the royal family at the palace doors." He told her as she curled her nails into her palms. They still had dirt underneath them from the day before.

Mal sat down so they couldn't see her face and took a few seconds to compose herself. Before she rolled the window back up, she leaned back up and said: "Hey, thanks."

"No problem." The man said, even though he didn't turn around to see her again.

She rolled up the window and moved around in the small space. She noticed another window leading to the outside and wandered over to inspect it. It was unlocked. Mal rolled it down and peered outside. Fresh air spilled into the car, and she gasped. She hadn't ever smelt air like this before. There were beautiful trees and plants outside and pretty houses with porch swings and decorated mailboxes. She examined her reflection in the car rear-view mirror. Her hair was messy, and there was dirt smudged on her cheek. Mal tried to rub it away, but it only smeared.

The window connecting her to the drivers rolled down and a hand appeared holding a handkerchief. She blinked at it for a few seconds and then moved over to grab it. She wiped at the area where the dirt was and then handed it back up. "Thanks again." She told the man in the passenger seat as he put on a pair of wire-rim shades.

"No problem." He repeated and tucked the handkerchief into his pocket. She returned to her spot by the window and let the wind tangle her hair even more.

So, they were going to let her meet the royal family after all. Surprising. She wondered what their plans were. It was still doubtful the king and queen would allow their only son to be openly married to a villainesses' daughter, even if it was required for him to ascend the throne. Doubtful even more so that they'd give her any sort of power to bring her mother over. And even if they did give her any sort of power, Mal wasn't sure she would ever bring her mother over. Why would she? It sounded like the perfect response to her mother burying her in this mess; leave her to rot and descend into madness even more. Mal examined her nails. A hole had formed in her heart, and she wanted, needed even, to move on. In her head, she labeled Maleficent as a thing of the past and went back to wondering about the future.

She wondered if they would marry her to him in absolute secrecy and then kill her directly after the ceremony. Entirely possible, though she still didn't know if Auradon had the backbone to kill people. She frowned and moved once more to the driving window. She rolled it down and drummed her fingers for a few seconds before she cleared her throat.

"Hey?" She asked the guy in the passenger seat. He moved his head, acknowledging he'd heard her. "Um," Mal began. "Does Auradon do death row?"

The confusion the two guards shared was palpable. The passenger seat guy turned around and
pushed his sunglasses down his nose as he studied her while the driver adjusted the rear-view mirror to see her. It was the same tall, mustached guy from last night.

"Why do you ask?" The helpful one asked.

"I'm... just wondering." Mal trailed off. "Like, are they gonna execute me?"

The guy took off his shades and blinked at her. "You're sixteen." He said. Mal shifted uncomfortably. "They're not going to execute a sixteen-year-old, especially after having to remove her from an extremely dangerous island in a mission that took over ten hours in all. If they wanted you dead, they would have hired a sniper. Except Auradon doesn't do death row. Or assassins. They just send them to the Isle of the Lost."

Mal sighed. "They can't exactly do that to me." She twiddled her thumbs.

"Yeah." The guy said. He slid his shades back on. "To be honest I don't know what their plans are. If it helps quell your nerves at all, I'm pretty sure there's a line in your mom's spell that outlines your safety, briefly though."

"Really?" Mal asked. So, Mom had at least thought of Auradon possibly executing her. That was comforting. Sort of. Still, Mal wasn't going to do anything for her mother.

"There's a line in Auradon's wedding treaty about that too." The driver said in an extremely gruff tone.

Mal sighed and turned to face away from them. She slid down the wall of the diving screen. "I don't want to think about that." She moaned as she unwrapped a small chocolate from the limo stash.

Passenger seat guy slid his shades off again and began to fiddle with the arms of them. "How much of this do you know about exactly?" He asked Mal. "You seem as confused as everyone else."

Mal shrugged. "I sorta found out yesterday." She admitted.

"Yesterday?" The driver asked in disbelief. "Your mom's had this thing going for almost twenty-five years and she told you yesterday?"

"How much do you know?" Mal snapped back. "I didn't exactly get the full run-down before she threw me to you lot."

There was no answer. Mal sighed and put her head down in her hands.

"Wow." The driver said after several long moments of silence. "That seems a little too harsh."

"Yeah," the other guard agreed. He slid his sunglasses on and took a deep breath. "Don't worry about it anymore, kid." He told Mal. "Hopefully we can figure something out and you can go back home soon."

"If the palace doesn't kill me, Mom will for coming home empty-handed." Mal blurted out. Neither of the guards said anything. After a while, she moved to the outside window again for the last time. The driver rolled up the dividing window, which was fine with Mal since she didn't want to talk to them anyway.

The car interior was nice with grey seats that were squishy and firm. It smelled like soap and there were little cupholders beside each car. Underneath the window was the collection of candies in
small glass dishes that Mal had been snitching from. If she'd been on the Isle still, she would have
stolen them and pawned them off for something of real use. Mal filled one of her cupholders with
hard, fruit-tasting candies and chocolates, which she snacked on as she watched the outside world
pass by. One of the guards kept a careful eye on her from the side-view mirror. She ignored him.

All too soon, the scenery changed and there were no more little houses with pretty swings and
mailboxes. Instead, the world became acres of well-maintained trees and flowerbeds. Mal knew
instinctively they were coming up on the palace. The outside world lost its luster after that. She
rolled up her window and ate her candy in silent misery, stuffing her pockets full of bits and pieces
to horde.

The windows, while heavily tinted, were still see-through. When she felt the car begin to slow
down, she glanced through the foggy glass and saw a number of figures outside. It looked like the
royal family had brought an army. Or the other car had already unloaded and the company of
soldiers was waiting for them. She groaned softly and wiped a finger on the outsides of her mouth
to make sure it was clean.

The car stopped. She heard the two soldiers up front get out of the car and moved to stand in front
of the still-locked door. The door opened and she was momentarily blinded by the sun shining in
her face, but then the two guards reached in and pulled her to a standing position and the
sunglasses one effectively shielded her from the sun.

In front of her was the crown prince, dressed in a long-sleeve, button-up blue shirt, and black
slacks. Four guards stood at the ready in case she wanted to try anything. He looked very surprised
to see her. His mouth was open a little and his eyes were flickering up and down her frame. He
looked handsome enough. Sandy blonde hair and blue eyes, a nice tan. He gave her an awkward
smile that held something in it she'd never seen on the Isle before. Behind Prince Benjamin was
Queen Belle, dressed in a yellow air dress, and King Adam, in a suit. Around them were many,
many loitering guards with big guns and lethal glares.

Mal steeled her back and crossed her arms as the prince came to his senses and shook himself back
to reality.

"Um, hi," He began flatly. Many of the guards exchanged glances and chuckled. Mal raised her
eyebrows and averted her gaze. The prince's cheeks took on a red tone. "It's nice to meet you..." He
walked a few paces past his bodyguards and stuck out his hand as he tried to meet her icy gaze
without freezing.

"Hm, Mal. Best of circumstances, of course," She gave a sarcastic little half-smirk as the nicer
guard released her right arm, so she could shake his hand. She noticed when he held on for half a
second longer and snatched her hand away to rip him from his daze. The hand on her arm was
promptly replaced. She sighed inwardly.

Prince Benjamin cleared his throat awkwardly. "Yeah, I guess it could be better. I'm Ben." He
shrugged.

"No Benjamin?" She asked. He shook his head. Mal tilted her head and continued her half-smirk. "I
hope you don't have a speech planned, because I need to use the bathroom."

The Prince opened his mouth, but no words came out. Instead, his father piped up. "Did you have a
nice trip?" He asked.

"Oh, splendid." The smirk vanished from Mal's face. She began to frown. "Ripped away from my
home and my life gone down the drain in less than a day." The two guards shifted uncomfortably,
King Adam didn't appear sympathetic in the least bit. He was fixing her with the exact cold, heartless look she'd imagined him wearing as he locked the villains on the Isle of the Lost. She'd seen it once on TV as a kid and never again since. "Well, hopefully, you and your mother will think about that next time."

Belle swatted his arm and frowned without removing her eyes from Mal. The older queen looked confused, to say the least. She seemed to be trying to take everything about Mal in. "Wasn't she supposed to be a bit older?" She whispered to no one in particular.

The commanding officer who held Mal's left arm in a vice grip cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, with all due respect, she appears to know as much as we do, if not less."

This appeared to be news to the entire guard and royal family, who all wore varying degrees of shock on their faces. The officer continued: "She told us her mother informed her around the same time we arrived to take her away."

Belle finally spoke up, voice wavering slightly. "She had no knowledge of the curse?" She asked.

"It would appear that way." The guard replied.

King Adam still appeared skeptical. "What do you say to all this?" He boomed at Mal.

Mal was not to be intimidated by the former beast. "Is it going to be any different for you to hear it from me instead of him?" She asked.

The king looked extremely annoyed. "Goodness gracious-" He began, but Belle shushed him.

"One more thing before we leave." The nice guard continued. He moved his arm to slide his shades down his nose. As he peered over the rims, he said: "She was very concerned you were only bringing her to Auradon to execute her."

Mal wished he hadn't have said that. She immediately turned her gaze skyward and pretended to be bored. Bored is the hardest expression to see through. If all they wanted to see was a villain, that was all they'd let them see.

"Execute her?" Belle repeated, sounding horrified.

"Oh, we don't do that." The prince said directly to her. She moved her gaze to his collarbone and watched his mouth move out of the corner of her eye. "That's something the villains do." He continued. Mal made a sound that was a cross between a snort and a scoff. The prince and guards looked at her curiously.

Belle pulled her arm out from her husband's elbow and drifted closer to Mal. "You don't have to worry about that, dear. We're just trying to reach a, um, compromise." She motioned for the guards
to remove their hands from her. They did, and Mal rubbed her shoulders.

"We're going to break the curse and then you can go home." King Adam growled.

"My mother will kill me if I go home," Mal responded automatically. She suddenly felt very vulnerable, spitting that out in front of the royal family.

"Not… really? Would she?" Ben asked in disbelief.

Mal rolled her eyes. "Are those words going to mean anything other than what I said if I repeat them?" She asked. Ben looked too shocked to answer.

Belle tried to salvage the situation. "We'll figure something out." She said, even though she didn't sound very sure. She looped her arm through Adam's. "Gentlemen, you're dismissed. Honey, we need to show Mal to her room."

"Yes, of course," Adam grumbled. He made a motion for Mal to follow them as they began to walk back to the castle. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure she was following and then refused to look at her. Most of the crowd dispersed, and only seven guards remained to follow her as she trailed behind the King and Queen. Prince Ben hurried to walk beside her.

"Is there anything we can do for you, Mal?" He asked as he gained a comfortable stride to match her pace.

"Again, a bathroom would be lovely. Also, not being magically bound to you and still being without a death guarantee would be nice. No offense." She smirked at the tall blonde beside her.

"None taken." He replied with a small smile. "To be honest, I feel the same way. Unfortunately, it's not that simple." He jumped to open the door to the castle for her and his parents.

Mal glared at him and furrowed her brow as she slipped through. One of the guards rushed forward to hold the door so Ben could rejoin the group. "What do you mean?" She asked in a hard tone.

Belle cleared her throat awkwardly as she led the group up the stairs in the main entryway. Mal's eyes flitted left and right to briefly take in the elegant entryway, but she was too engrossed by the conversation to take it in much. "We've already been in contact with the Fairy Godmother," Belle said softly. "She has arranged a team of people trying to rip the curse apart, but they've already admitted they don't even know where to start. The curse has many layers and is very complicated. As of right now, it's a hopeless cause." At the top of the stairs where a large doorway was, a hallway ran parallel to the room. They turned right and soon the front doors were out of sight.

A deep feeling clouded Mal's head. She felt like she was going to be sick. "So, we're stuck?" She asked and started to bite her cheek. She felt very lightheaded.

"Unfortunately, yes," Belle responded. She didn't sound nearly as angry as King Adam about that fact. Mal looked up and met the queen's brown eyes as the older woman studied her. She swallowed.

"What's the plan, then?" She questioned her shoes.

"We, um, were hoping…" Queen Belle responded uncertainly. However, she was abruptly cut off by Ben.

"Here we are!" The prince announced in a high voice. He gestured to a large door, but Mal was not to be distracted.
"You were hoping… what?" She narrowed her eyes and examined each of them, digging in her heels and straightening her stance.

The entire royal family was looking distinctly uncomfortable, and Mal had the feeling it was entirely her fault. Belle cleared her throat again. "We admit, we weren't expecting someone your age who had been equally hurt by Maleficent's curse. Much less someone who wasn't bent on becoming queen. On the contrary, we thought we'd have to hold you off of him, hence the guards." Belle gestured to the few guards who'd followed them up and were busy pretending to not be listening in to their conversation. "We were hoping to marry you quietly and grant you impartial rights to the kingdom so you couldn't bring your mother over while we scrambled to undo the curse."

Mal felt genuinely betrayed. How unfair. "You're actually going to make us get married? Doesn't Auradon have things to protect against this?"

King Adam jumped to defend his country's integrity. "The curse is over 20 years old and is technically hereditary. That means-"

"It's 200 times harder to break." Mal sighed. She looked away from everyone and examined the end of the corridor. The rules of curses and enchantments had been recited to her one too many times.

"Yes." Adam agreed. "How much do you know about magic?"

Mal snorted. "I live on an Island with a Magical barrier around it. My mother is insane and unstable and recites magic laws in her sleep. The most she and I can do is light our eyes up. Believe me, we've tried." She crossed her arms and dug her toes into the carpet as she leaned against the wall.

Ben looked extremely awkward as he rubbed his shoe against the floor. "Technically, you don't have to marry me. Except then I wouldn't be able to be king and we'd have to make a public explanation of some sort." He coughed and retreated a little.

"This is barbaric!" Mal protested with a frown. She balled her fists up and bit her lower lip. "Doesn't Auradon have laws to protect against this?"

"They're not specific enough," Ben answered immediately. "But in the future, we should definitely enforce regular spell checks to ensure that things like this don't slip by unnoticed. I'm not sure why we didn't start out doing that." Ben suddenly clamped his mouth shut and looked very embarrassed. "But Mom and Dad did do a great job helping Auradon startup. It sure wasn't easy to do everything they did."

"This is so unfair..." Mal sighed as she turned away from the family.

"Tell that to your mother," Adam muttered under his breath.

Mal glared at him. "Sure." She snapped. "I'll let her know as soon as this whole thing is over and I'm sent back to your orchestrated prison so you never have to think about how I'm costing you your throne again. Maybe I'll be able to get the words out before she slits my neck or bashes my brains across the sidewalk for not bringing her over because believe me when I say I'm leaving her to rot!"

Belle opened her mouth again as Adam swelled with rage. "We'll have to go back to the drawing board, as they say." She rested a hand on Adam's shoulder. "We truly weren't expecting someone who wasn't planning on riding this curse to its full effects." There was an apology in her tone, and
this was what Mal latched onto.

Adam jumped in, however, and Mal felt a headache form. Did the king and queen have to be such polar opposites? "Do think about it though. We know it's not the best situation, but the kingdom is already rampant with rumors, and--"

"Don't trouble her with any of that." Queen Belle commanded quietly. "This isn't something that should concern the kingdom. This is her whole life we're talking about. She needs to make her own decision." With these words, Mal finally garnered the courage to look up and examine Belle.

Mal had never met a woman like the queen, who was willing to put aside differences and first meetings to help console a teenager whose life was being rearranged. Mal managed a smile at the queen, who seemed surprised, but smiled back anyway.

"We'll try and come up with new ideas of course." King Adam babbled on as Belle started to lead him away.

"Of course we will," Belle said. "And now Mal can be a part of the proceedings. But let's go now. Mal needs to use the restroom, and probably shower too."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Mal said softly. The queen smiled softly and turned to lead her husband away by his elbow. All of the guards followed without order or gesture.

Ben moved out of the doorway as Mal moved closer to the door. Before she could turn the knob, he began to speak. "Y'know, I won't hold it against you if you choose to not marry me. I'll understand."

Mal blinked. The young prince refused to meet her eyes as pink filled his cheeks. "You know…"

She began with a sarcastic smirk. "…in most places they would call that a guilt trip."

Ben's eyes flitted up and met hers. There was no magic in that proverbial contact. "No offense, I'm kind of surprised to meet a villain kid like you."

Mal furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?" She questioned.

He held up his hands in defense. "Not interested in taking over the world for starters. How did Maleficent raise a kid like you?"

Mal chuckled dryly, and it was about that time it occurred to her that her throat was unbelievably dry. That must be why she felt so light-headed. "Usually I'm interested." She admitted as she licked her lips. They were beginning to become chapped. "But forced marriage to the crown prince is slightly more important, you know?" She pinched her fingers together to exemplify exactly how minutely important this was.

Ben laughed, which startled Mal because so far, none of the royals had thought her sarcasm was funny. "Yeah, I guess I can see that." He chuckled.

Mal cocked her head at him and examined his stance. The way he clung to the wall and searched her hostile stance made her furrow her lips in thought. "You're not very confident in yourself, are you?" She asked.

Ben shrugged and looked overall uncomfortable with the question. "I dunno." He trailed off. "I'm still learning the rungs, you know."

Mal watched as he shifted his weight from foot to foot and let his gaze flicker between her eyes,

"Right!" Ben reached out and opened the door for her, narrowly avoiding hitting her in the nose. "Bye." He waved with a small, embarrassed smile as she ducked under his arm.

"Bye." She waved in return and stepped inside.

The door swung closed, and she fell against the heavy wooden entrance in exhaustion. On the other side of the door, she heard a soft whisper of: "Nice to meet you too." Before footsteps carried the speaker away. She laughed a little. The remark hadn't been mean, or angry, only intrigued. Mal turned and couldn't stop an odd smile that spread around her mouth as she pressed her ear to the door, wondering if she'd hear more muttering from the Prince. There was none, but Mal was still intrigued. What an interesting collection of people.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, 101 Dalminations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Beauty and the Beast, or Cinderella.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Mal panics over the changes occurring in her life. She considers escape but doesn't. Mal and Ben fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After her shower, Mal patted her hair dry as she took in her surroundings. She got redressed in her old clothes, which kind of defeated the purpose of the shower but whatever, and began to look around. The room was most certainly not one of the biggest in the palace, but it was comfortable. It was done up mostly in shades of turquoise and tan. The room had more than four walls all set at different angles, but there were curtains hanging in such a way she couldn't actually tell how many corners there were. Multifacial room. The bed was pushed up in the center of the wall second from the door, parallel to the bathroom entrance. There was a dresser directly to the left of the bed instead of a nightstand. On this dresser sat a dark blue clock which looked like it was an hour fast.

The walls created a little hideaway cubby where a desk had been placed. This desk was peculiar in that it had a marble top instead of a wooden one. Mal ran a finger over it and found it devoid of any dust or lint.

Hidden out of sight from the door but visible from the bed was a small balcony, whose railing was placed very, very high. She could scarcely lift her arms up to brush the top of the blocks. She was sure the palace had picked this room with that feature for a reason, despite the fact she could push the desk over and scale it.

Should she?

Mal considered the implications of leaving. She could probably pick her way around Auradon, stealing and living out of the way of everyone. Mal examined the castle exterior walls and immediately picked out rough places in the brick overlay that she could easily climb if she wanted. She had no idea how far down the ground was, but chances were she could easily climb down to the ground. The guards might catch her, but if she was quick she could outrun them.

Mal grabbed the chair from the desk and pulled it over to the balcony. She climbed up and looked down at the ground below. It was only a story or so down. It'd hurt if she fell, but she and Jay had jumped further distances.

Mal made up her mind and hooked her fingers into the rocks. She swung herself off the balcony and climbed down a few paces so she could see the bottom of the balcony. There, she stopped.

If she did this, the prince wouldn't ever become king. Auradon would be angry, and they'd either elect a different monarchical family or... she didn't actually know. That was certainly evil, right? And she'd be free, so...

Something inside her told her that it would be a very, very bad thing. Who knew what sort of nasty things her mother had put on her curse? Maybe she should just... hang out and lay low.
Mal hauled herself back up the wall, using the balcony as leverage, and dropped back over the other side. She put the chair back in its place and continued looking around.

Around the rest of the room, there were other small pieces of furniture and personal items that she assumed had been placed for her. These included a bookshelf, nearly empty, with only a dictionary, thesaurus, and a small paper with a "wifi password", a rectangular device that lit up with a plain grey screen when she picked it up to see it and a cord she assumed was to be plugged into the base of it, if the shapes were anything to go by. There was also a bar of deodorant and a bar of soap, a bottle of shampoo and conditioner, a razor and a small container labeled bubble bath in the bathroom. She checked the walk-in closet beside the bed and discovered it entirely empty. She didn't even have hooks or hangars and all of Mal's stuff was probably still down in the limo somewhere. The drawers in the desks had nothing, not even a pencil, and the drawers of the dresser ground on dust when they opened. Everything was new, unused, and empty.

With so few things to look at, Mal quickly got bored of her surroundings. She walked over to the door with the intention of going out to explore. She tried the lock only to discover that it wouldn't turn. She frowned and bent down to examine it.

There were scratch marks around the metal base of the handle and it was placed unevenly. The Castle had tampered with the handle, and now the door locked from the outside. She was trapped in her room.

She sat down on the bed and considered her situation. To be honest, she should have expected something like that. Auradon seemed the petty sort to fear a sixteen-year-old with no experience here. The problem now was that she was utterly bored in a room with nothing to do.

She pulled the dictionary and thesaurus down and figured out how to attach and detach the cord from the rectangular device on the bookcase. She left the cord in the wall and brought the screen over to the bed. There, Mal considered it dubiously. She'd seen these before on the Isle, but they never worked. They came in with the garbage loads all cracked and useless. Sometimes Carlos took them apart to fiddle with the parts. Carlos would be able to figure out how to use the Thing, but she didn't know if she could.

It lit up when she tilted it up. She could see her reflection. The plain grey screen had few embellishments, and the only wording she could see right off the bat was the time and the date: July 29th. Then, she saw the words 'swipe left to begin' appear. They began to appear over and over in several different languages as well. Mal was only startled for a few seconds before she followed the instructions. Many more words appeared, showing her how to use the device and set it up. It taught her a number that people could use to contact her, and she was able to set a password and change the plain grey screen. She changed it to a photo she found on the web of the Isle of the Lost. It seemed fitting.

The phone informed her directly after the set-up process that unless she wanted to keep using data, she needed to connect to the wifi. That wasn't very daunting, considering it was on the paper by the bookcase, but Mal was proud to say she'd successfully navigating the complicated process.

There wasn't much on the tablet. There was a notepad, a recorder, two different virtual stores, a phone, and a camera. There were also a few other icons, but she wasn't sure what they were yet. One turned out to be a search engine, with which she searched her mother, Maleficent. There wasn't a lot there that she didn't already know.

After about two hours, there was a gentle knock on the door. Mal had figured out how to use the camera and other essential apps, looked up her friends' names (to which only their parents came up), and was now watching a video explaining how to remove a doorknob from the locked side.
She would have tried to kick the door open, but it was solid, and she didn't have the same muscle mass Jay did. And she'd rather not risk kicking the doorknob off and damaging the equipment so severely she really wouldn't be able to get out. The door couldn't be picked, and she'd begun to think the Royals had forgotten about her when she first heard the soft sound.

"Yes?" She called to the other side of the door. She uncrossed her legs on the bed and stared at the door suspiciously.

"It's Sophia, ma'am. I've come to check up on you." A feminine voice called.

"Well, I'd open the door, but I've been locked in," Mal replied sarcastically, leaning back on her wrist. On cue, the doorknob clicked. Mal looked up from her spot, sitting cross-legged on the bed, and watched a thin, black-haired woman slip inside with white muslin fabric draped over her arm.

"Good afternoon, miss," Sophia said, dropping into a small curtsey with a bright smile. "Is the room to your liking?" She looked around at the small space and nodded when she saw most everything was still in its place.

"Yeah, it's great. Thank you for asking. Just, y'know, the problem that I can't leave." Mal set the screen down on her ankles and gave the woman a pointed look. The poor servant looked immediately uncomfortable.

"Yes, I'm sorry, but it's merely a safety precaution for, ahem-" Sophia waved her hand to accentuate as she spoke.

"No, I get it." Mal cut her off with a wave. "I'm guessing I'm still not allowed out though, yeah?"

"Yeah," Sophia admitted shyly. "I did bring you this, though." She unfolded the muslin and flapped it out a little. It resembled a nightgown. It was designed to cover the entire length of her arms, come down to her ankles, and hide her collarbones. There was nothing exceptional about the garment except that there was some pretty red stitching around the collar. Not exactly much of an offering and Mal had never worn something so plain in her life.

"It looks a little big," Mal said slowly after a few seconds.

Sophia flushed a little. "Yes, miss. We're going to arrange for new things for you, but we must admit that we weren't anticipating someone so small."

Mal withheld a sigh. "I guess that's what happens when someone tips you off the night before, huh?" She murmured. Sophie nodded and laid out the dress on the bed.

"Why don't you get changed, miss? Then I can take your clothes away to be cleaned."

Mal looked down at her outfit and slipped off the bed without a word. She disappeared into the bathroom, taking the dress with her. She changed quickly and brought her clothes out for Sophia to slip outside with and toss into her cleaning cart. Mal assumed she would be bored for a while after that, but Sophia returned and sat down on the bed. Both women were quiet for a few minutes, then Sophia awkwardly cleared her throat.

"Is there anything I can bring you, miss?" She asked as Mal fiddled with a string poking out of the comforter on the bed.

"Just Mal." Mal snapped. She was getting sick of all the 'miss' crap. "I don't know. What are you allowed to bring?" She couldn't fix the door, or bring her friends, or let her out. Mal wasn't even sure what could help her boredom right now.
"Food," Sophia answered immediately. Mal perked up. Food would help. Food would help a lot. She hadn't eaten a real meal since yesterday morning.

Sophia continued listing options. "I could bring you some books from the library to put on your shelves in here. I could bring paper or pens, or if you're into sewing I could bring you some scrap materials?"

"I'd like some food, and paper would be lovely. I'm not really into sewing, though." Mal admitted to Sophia. "That was always my friend Evie's thing. She made all my things."

Sophia's face softened, and she looked touched. It was an expression Mal had never seen before, and it startled her. Sophia took Mal's hands and smiled warmly. "My Mother used to do that all the time." She admitted. "I didn't realize how much I loved it until she died, and I had to wear store-bought things. It broke my heart to buy a shirt when she'd always make mine."

Mal felt like she'd forgotten to breathe. Suddenly, Evie seemed further away than she'd ever been before. Mal looked down at the muslin dress in shock and realized it was the first thing she could remember wearing that wasn't an Evie original creation since she'd made friends with the girl at age eight. Her throat felt like it had closed, and that wasn't something she'd ever experienced before. Sophia let go of her hands and smiled again at Mal.

"I'll have some food sent up. Who knows, maybe I can send Ben up here as well." Sophia winked and shuffled out of the room. The doorknob clicked behind her, signaling that she was once again locked in.

Ben? How would Ben make anything better? If anything, seeing the crown prince would make things worse. She'd just been ripped from her home and everything she knew and now she was in Auradon and had absolutely no idea what she was doing. The air in the room suddenly felt very cold, but Mal's skin felt icy. She folded her trembling arms around her stomach as the urge to throw up came over her. She started seeing double. All the yellows and tans and whites in sight made her brain bleed and her eyes scream in agony.

What was she going to do? She was an Isle girl. She stole and lied and cheated. How could they make someone like her a queen of Auradon? She'd drive the entire country into the ground and bury herself in the rubble. She couldn't rule a kingdom. She didn't want to rule a kingdom. She didn't want to even have anything to do with Auradon, much less take it over as her mother would suggest.

Mal continued to spiral into a mindless panic. It was a horrible experience - she knew she was being irrational but she couldn't tell her brain to chill out. It was like she was being sucked into the middle of a twister, going tighter and tighter the more she struggled to get to the outside. The walls felt like they were being pulled down on her. She was starting to go slant-eyed as she struggled to stay upright. Darkness, Mal thought. She needed to find somewhere dark where she could hide.

Mal flung open the closet door and pulled it shut behind her. She folded herself into the corner and buried her face in her hands, begging the pounding in her head to calm down. The noise of the door rattling in its hinges was like nails on a chalkboard to her. Mal squeezed her palms on either side of her forehead with the same strength as if she were breaking up a fist fight. White spots appeared behind her eyes.

What was she going to do? What was she going to do? They were going to make her a queen, someone Ben could parade around while they struggled to break the curse. What about afterward? Would they let her abdicate? Or was this going to be her life forever?
Her vision went black and the air became harsh to breathe. Mal felt like she was in an extremely small, cramped box that was squeezing down on her from all sides. In her head, she heard Maleficent shrieking in the other room, exactly like the night they'd returned from the forbidden mountains after Maleficent's scepter had vanished and Mal had woken from her slumber. Their parents had been arguing in the next room, and the four of them - Evie, Jay, Carlos and her - had sat together in Carlos's mom's closet and formally agreed to work together. But Maleficent had been screaming over Cruella's, the Evil Queen's, and Jafar's arguments and Mal had sat with a pile of furs at her back with her feet carefully held clear of a bear trap as she and her new gang shook hands. She still remembered feeling Jay's hands, like leather between her fingers, with fear creeping down her spine like ice water as Maleficent screamed and her feet pounded nearer the door. It had been at this young age of twelve that it had occurred to Mal what the consequences of having an insane mother could be and the first time she’d ever feared becoming Maleficent. After twelve, she was content to be Mal. Mal had her head screwed on better than Maleficent anyways.

Mal wasn't sure at what point during this cloud of anxiety that the bedroom door opened, but suddenly she heard sounds from the other room. People were running back and forth. Their voices sounded like they were underwater. She tried to move her hands from her head to open the door but found they were immobilized. She couldn't move her body. Every muscle felt like she was being held down by iron weights. More panic settled throughout her body.

The closet door flung itself open and Mal became aware that Belle's yellow sundress hem was at eye-level with her. The yelling ceased, but there were quiet voices. Sophia appeared, and her mouth was moving. Mal suddenly felt very sick. She closed her eyes and shook her head. A horrible, horrible pain began in the center of her forehead, right behind her eyes. Mal's vision took a swim. She tried to bury her head into her arms, but an arm wrestled her chin up and two fingers pressed against her forehead. Why did everyone have to be so loud?

Someone who smelled like books and roses put their arms around her and leaned her back into the crook of their arm. Mal didn't resist, but she didn't let herself de-tense either. After several long minutes, their arms removed themselves, and a very, very heavy fabric fell around her shoulders and head. The pain evaporated almost instantly, and Mal's ears popped. A loud ringing that she hadn't even known was in her ear vanished. Someone was touching her back in a comforting manner.

What happened? What was that?

"Can you hear me now?" Someone asked quietly. It was Sophia, Mal realized, and she was proud she was able to decipher who had spoken since her ears felt like they'd been wrung out from the inside.

"Yes." She mumbled hoarsely. "My body feels like it's made of stone, though." It did. Everything was wound up and tense. Mal moved her stiffened fingers as her head readjusted to the light levels in the room.

"It was a panic attack, hun." Belle murmured to her. Mal stiffened a little at the queen's voice.

"You'll feel better once you eat. I brought food for you, just like I said. Can you stand up at all?" Sophia whispered, getting from her knees to her feet.

Of course, she could stand. She was the daughter of one of the most powerful faeries in the history of ever. There was no way a random… attack like that would stop her. Mal tried to uncurl her legs but ran into some resistance. She opened her eyes and realized that Belle and Sophia were not the only people in the room. Ben was sitting on the floor in front of her, and King Adam and another male servant were standing in the closet doorway, looking extremely concerned. Her face went red.
"Sorry." She said in a quiet voice, pulling her feet back toward her. "Sorry." She directed at Ben. "I didn't mean to kick you."

Ben smiled. "No problem." He assured her. "Just take it easy now." He got to his feet and moved out of the way.

Belle and Sophia helped Mal to her feet. She swayed a little from the blood rush and the weight gain from the blanket, which had slipped down off her head and onto her shoulders. Mal examined the blanket tactfully. It was heavy, brown and warm to the touch.

"What is this?" She asked and moved her arms for effect. The blanket flapped around her sides like a pair of earthy wings.

"A shock blanket. The weight helps with anxiety, and it's charmed with things like pain relief." Sophia told her as she helped Mal out of the closet and over to her bed. Adam and Ben cleared a path as Sophia waved them aside.

"I thought Auradon didn't use magic?" Mal asked as she sat down. The two books and her screen slid to her side. Belle moved them aside and sat down to rub Mal's shoulder bone lightly.

"We use certain brands." King Adam answered stiffly. "But that's not permission for you to do anything. We encourage our youth to discover their talents in other fields without the help of magic." His expression softened. "Are you alright, miss?" It was the first kind thing the king had ever asked. Belle must have really snapped at him.

Mal shrugged. "I don't know what happened. I thought the walls were going to fall so I went into the closet, and I heard the sounds as everyone was talking but couldn't move or speak." She stared at her hands in confusion. Belle patted her shoulder.

"It's alright dear. All over now. You'll feel a lot better after you eat, and we can always have someone check you out later." She looked at Mal's screen, where the picture of the Isle of the Lost was visible.

Ben sat down on the opposite side of her bed. "I thought you'd left." He said honestly. Everyone else nodded as they all slowly began to relax.

Mal snorted and shrugged. "To go where?" She asked. No one answered, which was fine because they weren't supposed to. Sophia procured a tray that she'd left on the dresser and handed it to Mal with a smile. Mal took it gratefully. On it was some toast, milk, some grapes and a tray of vegetables. To the side was a small bowl of seasoned rice and some wrapped silverware.

"What is everyone doing here?" She asked as she picked up a little vine of grapes.

"We needed to discuss what we're going to do with this mess." King Adam said in his loud, booming voice. Mal closed her eyes as the sound triggered a small headache. Belle laid a hand on Adam's shoulder and shook her head.

"The Fairy Godmother will be coming by before tonight, but we felt it would be better if we had some idea of what we wanted before she got here," Belle told Mal in a tone barely above a whisper.

"Sounds reasonable. What exactly do we need to happen?" She asked, keeping her eyes closed as she popped grapes into her mouth, one by one.

"We need your decision, really. Everything is riding on that. We can't figure out if Ben can become
King or not if we don't have your decision on what you want." Belle told her with a sorrowful tone in her voice.

Mal looked up from her food in surprise. "You want me to choose now? I just got here. Don't I get time to weigh my options or anything?"

"The options as far as we know are you marry Ben and he can become King, or you don't, and we have to figure something else out while pacifying the people." Adam rolled his eyes. "There's not much else to it. We're not going to abdicate the throne to you."

"How long do we have?" Mal asked.

"Three months." Ben murmured, slumping against the wall and looking absolutely miserable. "Give or take."

A split decision. That's what they wanted. Mal felt the panic return. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned away from everyone. This isn't what she wanted, this isn't what she wanted. What would her mom do? Wait, she was supposed to be angry at her mom. What wouldn't her mom do? She squeezed her throat shut. The evil thing would be to say no. The evil thing would be to reveal this to everyone in Auradon. The evil thing would be to force their hand and show everyone just how evil the king and queen had been. She opened her mouth. "Fine." She said.

"Fine?" Ben looked surprised. "Does that mean yes?"

Mal let out a ragged breath. "If anything else - anything else - comes up that will make this work, I'm going to change my mind," She growled. She speared a spoonful of rice in absolute misery. "Now what?"

Everyone looked extremely relieved. Meanwhile, Mal felt like she was being crushed. She fiddled with the bedspread and refused to look near the prince. Said young man let out a low whistle. "I guess now I really need to break up with Audrey."

"Audrey?" She asked. Ben groaned good-heartedly.

"My girlfriend." He explained, waving his hands a little as he spoke. "We haven't been working out for the last little bit, so this is a great opportunity for me to-"

"You seriously brought me over from the Isle of the Lost in the hopes that I would marry you, all the while not thinking about the very important fact that you have a girlfriend?" Mal snapped, looking affronted. Ben remained silent. Mal scoffed and popped a grape off a stem to resist flinging her knife towards the prince. "Auradonians." She growled. No one was very sure of what to say.

"Are you going to lock me away?" Mal asked after a few long seconds of silence. She imagined herself stuck in this room day-in and day-out, watching the sun rise and set and never going anywhere.

"Of course not," Belle said. She laid a gentle hand on Mal's shoulder. "We understand how hard this must be for you. So, we were planning on keeping this from the public for a little longer and releasing the information about a month before the coronation. In the meantime, it'd probably be best for you to stick around, and get to know everyone. We want you to feel comfortable here. And we also need to figure out things like how much control you have over the kingdom, and-"

"I don't want your kingdom." Mal interrupted. She stared down her plate with a hot feeling growing
in her belly. "Tell the public that. I honestly don't want any part of the power." All three royals and Sophia looked shocked. The tall male, who had remained silently beside the closet door this entire time, looked mystified.

"Well, the curse says-" Adam began, but Belle waved a hand at him to silence him.

Ben cleared his throat. "That's for a later time. Is this room good for you?"

Mal gestured with her fork at the walls. "Yeah. It's great. A little bare, but overall nice." She took a bite. "You know what would be nicer?" She asked.

"What?" Ben asked leaning forward in that interrogative way of his.

"If I could go and walk around," Mal sighed.

Belle blinked. "Can't you?" She asked. Mal shook her head in the negative. King Adam cleared his throat.

"I had one of the servants switch the lock around. For safety's sake, back before we knew what we were dealing with." He looked at the ground with a bit of pink tingeing his cheeks.

Belle turned a furious shade of red, and both Sophia and Ben leaned away like the air around her had suddenly become uncomfortably warm. "I told you-" Belle sputtered at her husband. "We would never again have prisoners here. I was the last one."

Ben buried his face in his hands and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Goodness." He groaned. "You'd think this family has a thing for imprisoning their future queens."

"Stockholm syndrome," Mal commented dryly, spearing a vegetable.

"No, no it wasn't," Belle rolled her eyes. The red tones were slowly fading out of her cheeks. King Adam looked properly scorned.

"I'll have the servants switch it back before tomorrow night." He sighed.

"Yes, you will." Belle bit out. She pursed her lips together and flashed her eyes at Adam.

Mal watched and was slightly impressed. She had had no idea the queen was such a force to be reckoned with. "So, the way I have it, I marry him- unless we figure out a way to break the spell. If we figure out how to break it after I marry him, we divorce and part ways as unlikely friends." Belle and Adam nodded along to her words.

"What about after that?" Mal asked. Everyone looked confused. "If you send me back to the Isle my mother will put me on death row. And that's only if I manage to get to her. The rest of the Isle might just kill me since I was a former royal. We don't exactly like you guys."

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Ben drummed his fingers awkwardly on the dresser. Belle swallowed.

"So, I'm just doomed to die, or doomed to never go home again, or what?" Mal prompted.

"Auradon doesn't do death row," Adam growled. "So, we can't just kill Maleficent. And there's nowhere else to put her. You'd have to stay here. We could set up a place for you. There's nothing else."

Belle set a hand on her husband's shoulder to calm him down. "He's right, Mal. We can't relocate
the entire Isle. You'd have to stay here in Auradon."

"Fine. Whatever." Mal growled. She bit her cheek and steeled herself against the pain she was feeling at the moment. There was nothing else to be done. All their arguments were infallible. "Three months then. Do I marry Ben and then we just not tell anyone, or what?"

Belle and Adam exchanged a look, then Belle spoke again. "I don't feel that's the right thing to do. Originally that was going to be the idea, so we could prevent an uprising against the crown, but I truly don't think we have anything to fear from you. You don't even want partial rights to the crown. It... wouldn't be right to hide something like this when we have no reason to."

Mal scoffed. "You could save yourself the embarrassment of Belle's son marrying Maleficent's daughter." She whispered.

"Um, I'm here too." Adam scowled. He rubbed his face with his hands and let out a quiet groan. Belle bit her lip.

"We could do a joint service at Ben's Coronation. We could coronate the two of you as rulers and have a ceremony along with it. Would you like that?" Belle asked, patting her hand.

Mal pulled her hand away and shook her head. This was all happening so fast. And now she was to be embarrassed as the King's puppet wife. "I don't know. I have no clue. All I really know is that I'm marrying him in three months because my mother is evil." She closed her eyes. "You pick. If you want it kept quiet I won't care, and if you want me to walk down an aisle I'll do it. Either way, the end result is the same."

Adam touched his wife's shoulder. "It doesn't have to be decided now. We can talk later, but it's clear Mal is exhausted. If her panic attack is anything to go by, she needs rest, food, and quiet. Let her and Ben talk for now. We have our own things we need to discuss." Belle nodded and stood up. She patted Mal's shoulder as she walked by.

"Goodbye, for now, Mal." She said in a soft tone to the purple-haired teenager. Adam held open the door for the queen as she walked out. As soon as it had closed, Sophia began gathering things up to take away. Mal handed the empty tray to the female servant and watched until Sophia and the male servant, who had stood quietly in the corner while the family talked, had left.

Ben cleared his throat and shifted closer to Mal on the bed. She stopped him with a hand. "Please don't touch me." She demanded. "I don't care if I just agreed to marry you, you are still a stranger and I don't want you to touch me."

"Oh," Ben said, quite lamely, sitting back on the mattress.

Mal groaned and buried her head in her hands.

"What's on your mind?" Ben asked. She peeked out in between her fingers at him. He bent down and looked right back at her. "I'm serious. Talk to me." He said.

She straightened up. "Oh, you know, just thinking about how my life managed to go down the drain in less than forty-eight hours." She chirped in a falsely cheerful tone. "How's your day been going?"

Ben said nothing. He leaned in, facing her, and waited for her to continue. After a while, the silence became uncomfortable, and Mal began to talk again.

"It's just- you know how unfair this is? You don't know me, and I don't know you, and you're five
years older than me! I'm sixteen! In what sort of world is it okay for sixteen-year-old to have to be deciding if they're going to let a kingdom fall apart for maybe a year or so while a curse is broken or if they're going to get married to fulfill part of an evil curse? On top of that, I'm never going to be able to go home again. Bam! That door in my past is shut, locked, and barricaded. All my friends, all my past, everything is gone." Mal curled up miserably. "For some reason, my body stopped working because I thought I was going to be crushed in this room, and I'm going to be bored out of my mind until someone unlocks that stupid door!"

"The door is unlocked," Ben mentioned. "It has to be locked from the other side and Sophia never locked it when she left."

"Were you the one who locked me in earlier?" Mal asked.

"No. It was already set to lock the moment the door closed. I did know it would lock since I heard dad tell Lumiere to have that done. Oh, Lumiere was the man who was in here before. He's been with my dad since he was a beast living alone here." Ben smiled a little.

"Oh really? What piece of furniture was he?" Mal sighed without really caring about the answer.

"Candelabra. To be honest, I kind of accredit him with my existence. Mom would have escaped from the castle and never looked back if Lumiere hadn't offered her a better room and food." Ben bit his cheek as tapped his hands on his knees.

"What luck. And while your parents lived out their happily-ever-after, he stayed on as a servant." Mal retorted sarcastically.

"Hey, Lumiere is more than a servant." Ben defended the former candlestick. "He taught me how to play ball and to throw a frisbee. And he and mom would team up to help me with my schoolwork. He was one of my best friends and role models growing up."

Mal chuckled. "That explains a lot." Ben frowned. Mal sighed and curled her legs up into her frame. "He sounds happy though. Everyone is Auradon sounds happy."

Ben leaded back into the bed. "Eh, we have our problems." He admitted. "But, yeah. Happily-ever-after is a work in progress."

"You get there," Mal mumbled, pushing her hair out of her face.

Ben tapped his hands anxiously on his knees. "I mean... this is Auradon. Land of opportunities, where we can be whatever we want to be. What do you want to do?" He turned to Mal and watched as she started biting the ends of her hair and twirling the locks in her fingers.

"I can't do what I want to do." Mal sighed. She couldn't go home, she couldn't leave Auradon, she couldn't even climb out of the palace.

"Be evil?" Ben asked curiously. It didn't seem like a bad thing when he said it. It was almost as if he were suggesting she become a lawyer, or a teacher, or something.

Mal pushed her hair out of range of her teeth and folded her hands in her lap. "I dunno if I am evil. I just keep to myself. Don't touch what's mine, and we get along fine." Her mother would have cut out her tongue if she'd heard her daughter say such things, but Mal knew in her heart that they had to be true. She didn't want to be Isle, but she definitely didn't want to be Auradonian either. Both seemed toxic and corruptive.

Ben nodded as if that made sense. "You're not evil." He announced to the room. His voice echoed
Mal glared at him. He backed off a little. "How do you know that?" She asked softly.

"I'm listening to my heart." Ben gave her a little smile. Mal examined him for any hint of a lie, but either he was being truthful, or Auradonians were much better liars than Isle folk.

Ben put his hand on the bed, in easy reach if she decided to put her hand on his. But Mal wasn't really that kind of girl. She folded her arms with her hands pinned under her armpits. "So, what do you want to do?" He asked.

Mal didn't say anything, so Ben leaned forward a little more. It was a subtle psychology trick he'd learned as a ten-year old to get people to feel like they had to talk more. She sighed in exasperation. "I don't know," She sighed, hiding her face with her hands and rubbing her eyes. The last remnants of the panic attack were wearing off. "You're being quiet though. What do you want?" She turned to face him with an accusatory look.

"I don't know either." Ben shrugged. He held his hands up and began to move them around in the air as he spoke. "It's just... I've always focused on..." He trailed off.

"Being king?" Mal asked, pulled her legs up to her chest and covering her legs with the hem of the oversized dress.

Ben put his hands together and sighed. "Yeah." He agreed.

They were silent for about a minute before Mal swung her legs back down and turned her body towards him. She swallowed and then hooked her hands together on one of her knees. "If... you knew the kingdom would be fine either way, what would you want to do? Where would you go?"

Ben snorted and raised an eyebrow at her. "You're a bit obsessed with this 'go-wherever-I-want' freedom, huh?" He asked.

"Happens when you've been imprisoned on an island all your life." Mal slurred. She cocked an eyebrow at Ben.

Ben shifted with an uncanny look on his face. "See? You are." He hesitated and then got to his feet to pace in front of the foot of the bed as he waved his hands with increasing flare. "And- I would totally be that guy! I would want to fix things like that. I would be perfectly happy to, I don't know, travel a tiny bit here and there but mainly just stay here and pass laws and solve problems like that. Help people and fix things that..." He trailed off.

"Things that your parents forgot?" Mal finished for him. She didn't move from her spot on the bed.

"Yeah." Ben sighed as he sat back down. "But I'm never sure of how I should go about it without hurting their feelings."

Mal brushed her toes along the carpet and chewed on the ends of her hair. "I hope you get a happily-ever-after," She whispered. Ben looked surprised at the brutal honest tone in her voice.

"You too." He said. A bit of dust flew down his throat and made him cough. Ben coughed so loudly he almost didn't hear Mal scoff.

"I'm a villain. We don't get happily-ever-afters." She muttered, pulling in annoyance at her sleeves.

"Of course, you do. Everyone deserves a happy ending!" Ben protested. Mal laid her head on her
crossed arms but turned to look at him.

"Funny." She commented. "I don't recall that being in the end of war manifesto."

Ben knew exactly what phrase she was referring to in the proclamation that had basically created Auradon. ‘We hereby banish the villains from this land in the hopes that our inhabitants will have an equal opportunity at Happily-Ever-After in the new world we will raise up.’ He had no comeback.

"When you sent us away, you kept our dreams and opportunities here. I know people who have - had - dreams that could never happen on the Isle." Mal met Ben's eyes. "I honestly can't think of a more villainous thing to do than to keep children from their dreams."

Ben almost fell off the bed in shock. He'd never thought of it that way, but she was completely right. The children on the Isle of the Lost were deprived and denied any form of happiness. Villainy. He clutched a hand to his chest. Mal scoffed at him. "Well, don't start acting like you care now." She said sarcastically. "after all, you've put almost twenty-three years into making sure we know exactly where we rank in the scale of things." She stood up.

"I don't really want to see you right now." She waved her hand to dismiss him. "You know where the door is."

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, 101 Dalminations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Beauty and the Beast, or Cinderella.
Mal receives a cell phone and meets the Fairy Godmother. She is tested for the crown and passes. Ben tries (and fails) to make a move on her.

Mal's door remained unlocked, but she didn't go anywhere except down the hall. Mainly because she couldn't remember where she'd come from and a piercing headache had started in the front of her brain, right behind her eyes. So, she hung out in her room. Not long after Ben left, Sophia came around and brought paper, writing utensils, books, and a little list filled with lots of numbers.

"What's this?" Mal asked, as she rubbed her head and squinted at the writing. She recognized the names written on the sides of the numbers, but her head still didn't feel like it was working correctly.

"A list of important phone numbers for the palace," Sophia answered. She had a tea set on the dresser and was preparing a cup for Mal. "My number is on there too." She said as she added a small pill to her cup, which fizzled into the drink and disappeared.

"What do I do with them?" Mal asked. She sounded flat-out exhausted as she tried to focus on the paper.

Sophia chuckled and took the list out of her hand, replacing it with the tea, which Mal stared blearily at in confusion. "For your headache," Sophia told her. "Drink up. Where is your phone?"

It was lying on the bed, locked. Sophia handed it to Mal, who quickly entered her password and then gave it back because the light hurt her head even more. She took a sip of the hot drink Sophia had given her and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. "Oh gosh." She moaned as her head cleared. "This heals everything."

Sophia opened the text app with a chuckle. While Mal finished her tea, Sophia entered her phone number and set the message 'Mal Bertha'.

"Look, Mal. Now you can contact me." Sophia explained to Mal, showing Mal her own phone screen, which had lit up with a green notification with her name in it.

Mal looked at the screen and watched as Sophia showed her how to label the number with a contact so that she'd know it was Sophia.

"Why are there two keyboards?" Mal asked, noticing a different panel at the bottom of the screen.
She pointed to it so that Sophia could see what she was talking about.

"One is a picture keyboard." Sophia simplified. "There's a bunch of faces and animals and stuff. Want to see?"

Mal shook her head. Eventually, she'd be left alone, so she could explore the picture-keyboard then. She observed in bleary exhaustion as Sophia entered in a new number and sent her name through. This time, a little grey text box appeared with three dots in it.

"They're messaging back," Sophia explained to Mal, gesturing to the box.

'Ben Florian' was the name that came back. Mal frowned. "Is that Prince Ben, Ben?" She asked.

"Yes." Sophia nodded and watched Mal to see what her reaction would be.

"Oh," Mal replied lamely. The phone buzzed in Sophia's hand. A moving picture had appeared from Ben. It featured a middle-aged man with a friendly smile, who was waving with the caption: 'Hi'.

Sophia continued adding Belle, Adam, Lumiere, and a few other people. One of these was named Doug. When Doug first received the message with Mal's name from Sophia, he immediately texted back a paragraph. There wasn't much meat to it. It was basically "If you need me, come ask" "Sorry if I take a while to answer texts."

Sophia was very kind to keep Mal's saucer topped with headache remedy, but eventually, she had to slip away to refill the pot. Mal, who felt much better, took the books Sophia had brought and began to fill her little bookcase up. She discovered a surprise: a thick, white comforter hidden underneath the pillows on her bed. She traded her shock blanket for it and took the paper and pencils Sophia had brought her. Then, she hid out in the closet, which she liked because it wasn't as bright, and it was a smaller space. She did keep the door cracked open a stitch, so Sophia wouldn't wonder where she'd gone if she came back.

Mal liked to doodle. She'd done more than her fair share of graffiti on the Isle, decorated their hideaway behind the rock-pulley system, and spent a fair majority of her time in class drawing on scraps of grey paper. It was nice to work with all the new utensils instead of the emptyish ones she got on the Isle. As she was finishing putting the finishing touches on a rendering of her new home, the castle, she heard a knock at the door. She pushed the closet door open a little with her toes and called: "Come in!"

The door opened and revealed a woman who Mal had seen many times on TV. She cautiously climbed to her feet.

The Fairy Godmother flashed a beautiful smile. "Hello, Mal." She greeted, then curtseyed. "I'm the Fairy Godmother. I've been told you aren't what we were expecting."

The Fairy Godmother wore a blue dress with a retro collar and a pink bow fastened beneath her collarbone. Underneath her skirts, Mal could see the edges of a black and white polka-dotted fabric attached to the bottom of the knee-length dress. She wore blue plastic flats and wore her hair curly with a pretty silver clip in it.

Mal swallowed and managed a small bow, of some sorts. "It sounds like you were expecting Hades himself." She said softly.

"Not Hades, but a mini-Maleficent, perhaps." The Fairy Godmother's smile faded a little as her eyes began to travel. Mal shifted her weight and began twirling a lock of hair around her finger as
the older woman studied her.

"White isn't really your color, is it, dear?" Fairy Godmother asked with a smile.

Mal smirked. "Just don't put me in yellow and we'll be fine."

Fairy Godmother laughed. "How old are you, dear?" She asked.

"Sixteen," Mal answered, leaning against the closet frame and kicking her leg up to rest against the doorframe. At her answer, the Fairy Godmother looked sad.

"My, you're much younger than I was expecting." The Fairy Godmother whispered. "You're about the same age as my daughter Jane."

"What are you here for, again?" Mal asked. This conversation was going way off track, in her opinion.

"To talk, mostly. I was curious, have you experimented with your mother's magic yet?" Fairy Godmother sat down on the bed and examined Mal even further.

The question startled Mal. Of course, she knew her mother had possessed some of the strongest magics in the land before her imprisonment. The fact she had created and executed this elaborate mess was a testament to that. But the idea that she would have similar powers hadn't occurred to her. The only thing she'd ever been able to do was make her eyes light up.

Fairy Godmother chuckled. "I suppose not, then? Can you try now? Do you know any spells?" Mal shook her head. Everything her mom had once crammed down her throat and into her head felt like years ago now. "Make something up." Fairy Godmother encouraged her. She bit her cheek as she crossed her ankles daintily and waited.

Mal raked her newly not-aching brain and quickly made a flimsy rhyme. "Snap my fingers like a thread, hurry to fix the hair on my head."

Upon her words, her fingers took a life of their own. A sharp green light appeared at the end of her fingernails. She flicked her hand left, then right, and then made a little circle around her face, all against her will. Her vision went green and foggy for a few seconds, and then she felt the strands on her head rearranging and straightening themselves into something that hopefully didn't look like she'd had a mental breakdown earlier and lost her cool at the future king of Auradon. Mal slumped back in exhaustion as soon as she had control of her hand back.

The Fairy Godmother applauded lightly. Mal stared in surprise at her fingers, and then quickly turned her attention back to the Fairy Godmother. Conversation now, panic over new revelation later.

"Well, Auradon discourages magic, I'm sure you know. You might be able to find books in the library to teach you about theory and things like that, but active practice is a punishable offense, usually with heavy fines and sometimes community service. And of course, spells work better if the lines match syllables, and if they're in multiples of three, seven, or with the same number of beats as your age." Laugh lines appeared in the older woman's face as she smiled proudly at Mal. "But, laws aside, you could very powerful one day, even without practicing magic. I hope you'll recognize that and use that power for good."

Mal had no clue what she was going to do at that point. She was still blown away that her first feeble attempt at a spell had worked.
The Fairy Godmother cleared her throat. "If I may, can I sample your magic? If there's any correlation to Maleficent's, it might help with decoding her curse. We have already sampled former cursed items, but it appears in different… context on Ben." She gestured to Mal's hands.

Mal swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. Anything to get me out of this mess." She outstretched her fingers and walked towards the Fairy Godmother.

At her words, the Fairy Godmother looked incredibly sorry. She took Mal's hand and spread her fingers out. She began to mumble, and the tips of Mal's fingers relit. A warmth spread through her palm. But the Fairy Godmother quickly let go. She shook her head. "Your magic is the same type hers is, but it's far too weak at the moment to be able to unravel her curse. It's also slightly warped."

"Warped?" Mal asked, alarmed. How could it be warped? She'd cast one spell her entire life and now she was damaged forever. Just her luck.

"It happens naturally." The Fairy Godmother assured her. "Everything in the world has a little magic, and your magic grows depending on where you live and how you use your powers. I bet the barrier over the Isle is what warped it the most." Fairy Godmother shrugged. "Anyways, we can't have you help us break it yet until you're a little stronger."

"How long will that take?" Mal asked.

"Well, you should have been growing your magic at a steady rate for several years now." Fairy Godmother explained. "For you to recover and exercise your magic enough to gain enough power would take two or three years of intense magical growth, which you won't be able to get in rhabdophobic Auradon."


"Cheer up dear. We'll figure this out. For now, are you alright? I heard you had a panic attack today. Has that happened before?" She folded her hands in her lap and tilted her head.

"Yeah, I did," Mal admitted. "And no. I've never had anything like that happen. I just, the walls felt like they were going to fall in so I went into the closet to hide."

"And couldn't stand up?" Fairy Godmother prompted, looking worried.

"Or hear or move or anything," Mal agreed. "It was like my brain was shaking and my body went stiff." The Fairy Godmother examined Mal as she moved her hands in explanation. Mal carefully sat down next to the wingless-fairy.

"Before then, had you eaten or drank anything?" The Fairy Godmother asked.

Mal shook her head. "No. Well, I had some candies on the way to the palace this morning, but nothing else since lunch yesterday. I missed dinner because my mom decided to inform me that I was leaving."

"That would play into it. You probably didn't sleep all that well either, huh?" Fairy Godmother nodded as if this all made sense to her.

"No," Mal admitted sheepishly.

"We have panic attacks like that at the school every year when finals roll around." The Fairy
Godmother informed her. "People forget to take care of themselves. We get panic attacks and people passing out when they're exercising, among other things."

"Oh. So, I just need to keep on top of that?" Mal asked.

"That should do it. Of course, if it persists, see a doctor." Fairy Godmother smiled.

Mal made a face, and the Fairy Godmother laughed. A silence formed for a few seconds. The Fairy Godmother looked around the room. "Did you really not know you were coming here?" She asked quietly.

Mal withdrew into her frame and clammed up. "She sat us down in front of the TV and wouldn't say a word on why she was so excited. When they finally brought Ben out of his meeting with you and King Adam gave his statement to Auradon, she told us in celebration while she was dancing around the room. None of my friends or the other villains had any idea what to think. No one talked to me all day."

"So, it wasn't exactly a surprise when they showed up?"

"Well…" Mal trailed off. "I don't know. It all went so quickly." The Fairy Godmother crossed her legs and leaned forward to Mal. She waited until the purple-haired girl began to speak again. "I was angry at first, but then I managed to convince myself she'd been lying. I mean, Mom's had tons of elaborate plans to leave before. But when I came back they'd already packed up my things for me and the guards showed up about five minutes later to drag me away."

"On behalf of Auradon, I apologize." The Fairy Godmother whispered softly. Mal snapped into an upright and hostile position and furrowed her eyebrows at the Fairy Godmother.

"You'll apologize for this and not for the Isle of the Lost?" She accused. The Fairy Godmother looked taken aback.

"Why should we apologize for the Isle of the Lost? We had to protect ourselves from the villains." She explained with confusion evident in her tone.

"I find it funny," Mal said bitterly. "How you fought an entire war where both sides lost thousands of people and still refused to use the death row to eradicate the problem. It's your fault I'm here in the first place. If you had killed Maleficent, I wouldn't have to deal with this – this burden! Or if you had come up with a different solution to the Isle of the Lost: banished them outside the kingdom, removed their powers, again: killed them, then Mom never would have thought to create this spell in the first place. Who's to say it's her fault and not Auradon's?"

"We don't believe in killing or hurting people like that." Fairy Godmother explained to try and placate Mal. This only riled the teen up even more.

"And that's another thing!" Mal retorted angrily. "Auradon's famous honor code; despite the fact you imprisoned hundreds of your worst villains, murderers, and schemers on the Isle and refuse to provide them the basic essentials to life outside of the weekly trash delivery, you don't believe in removing a person's magic and allowing them to walk free for their lives? Haven't you heard what happened to Ursula's eye? Or my Mother's wings?"

The Fairy Godmother was silent. Then, she pointed at Mal's head. "Your horns, dear." She whispered.

Mal blinked in surprise. She cautiously reached up to feel the top of her head and fell two curved protrusions descending back into her skull. They felt like warm stone or ivory. But they were only
there for a second, and then they were gone. She stared in shock at her fingertips, as if she were
doubting what they'd felt.

Across the room, the door creaked, and someone knocked. Mal turned her sharp gaze to the
entrance. After a few seconds delay, it opened a little more and Prince Ben appeared, looking
sheepish. He cleared his throat and began to speak in a high, awkward tone:

"Erm, sorry, we're waiting for you in the library, and-"

"How long have you been standing there?" Mal interrupted his introduction. Ben wilted. Mal
scoffed. "Long enough, then." She stood up and, after a moments' hesitation, took her new phone
with her. Ben's face was red as she marched past him at a brisk pace. She stopped outside the door
and pretended to wait for him and the Fairy Godmother, but truthfully, she didn't know where the
library was.

Ben held the door for the older woman as she walked past, then took up the lead. Mal walked
beside him. If she couldn't lead, she sure as heck wouldn't fall behind him. Ben curled and uncurled
his hands like he wasn't sure what to do with them while they swung at his side.

Ben stopped outside of a pair of doors that were three times his height. Why anyone would need
doors this tall, Mal didn't know, but she hoped some giant found them useful one day. Ben opened
the door to allow the Fairy Godmother, who had remained silent during the walk down, and Mal,
to walk through.

Mal sucked in a breath at the tall beams of the library. The ceiling was patterned opposite the floor,
with the ceiling being the lighter inverse of the pattern on the floor. The room was a very large
rectangular prism, with the wall ahead made of glass and looking out over the kingdom. The wall
they'd just entered with their backs to had a beautiful mural of the castle, featuring a beautiful girl
in yellow and a rose, among other things. It must have been the story of Belle and her Beast, Mal
noted as she took in a ferocious, growling monster in a corner of the wall. The last two walls were
made of books. Several other enormously tall bookshelves filled the magnificent room, but directly
in front of her was a collection of rose-embroidered couches and chairs surrounded by a rosewood
coffee table with dozens of papers and folders spread out on it. Belle and Adam were sitting in two
armchairs and holding each other's hands. They looked up without a smile as the group entered the
room.

"Come and take a seat." Adam invited in a weary tone. He raised a hand and beckoned the three
towards him.

They did, and Ben and Mal ended up sitting next to each other on the two-seater so that everyone
could examine them. Ben still hadn't said anything to Mal since telling her they were waiting for
him. He twiddled his thumbs and did his very best to politely ignore her.

"We have about three months until Ben is due to become King." Adam began in a grave tone. "Mal
has agreed to marry him, but only as a last resort. One of the new goals of this meeting is to ensure
she is no more trapped than we are."

Everyone flinched at the King's harsh, straight-to-the-point words. Mal bit her tongue and
examined the mural on the wall.

"The spell… it is too complicated to break at this moment." The Fairy Godmother admitted. "We
don't know where to start." She picked up a manila file on the coffee table and opened it up. On the
top was a black and white photo of what looked like a mess of spiderwebs.
"This is one micro-cubic traunct of the spell." The Fairy Godmother explained. She laughed at Ben's confused expression. "A traunct is the smallest portion of any spell. It's much like an atom in how magic is made up. Unfortunately, this one is, by far, the most complicated of any spell I've ever seen. In most cases, a simple undoing spell could sever small trauncts. However, Maleficent has done something rather unique in that these trauncts are backing each other up, and nothing we've tried thus far has severed their hold. We're going to have to unravel it or submit to it."

"Unravel it?" Belle asked.

"In order for us to unravel it, we have to find a hink, or a hole in the trauncts so we can loosen their hold and put them apart little by little. The spell won't be broken, per se, but we can pull conditions off the spell until eventually, it will be as though it has no power on you."

"Sounds like a lengthy process," Mal commented.

"It is." The Fairy Godmother admitted sheepishly. "I've never seen anything so complicated. We're looking at a year, maybe two years' worth of work."

King Adam made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded like the beginning of a groan, or like he'd been kicked or something; a defeated sound.

"There's no hope it'll be gone before Ben's coronation?" Mal begged.

"Unless there's a major breakthrough within the next ten minutes." The Fairy Godmother said. Mal turned her head away from the group and schooled her features to indifference. Ben leaned forward and started running his hands through his hair. The only sound was that of Mal tapping her hands on her knees.

"I think it's time to start talking about the kingdom's infrastructure when Mal becomes Queen." The Fairy Godmother said quietly. No one missed the use of the word 'when'.

"Right," Adam muttered. "What are the details of Maleficent's curse?"

"Mal must become Queen before Ben is twenty-five, otherwise the both of them will begin to experience excruciating pain. If Mal is murdered, then Ben will go with her. If she's maimed in any way that she's rendered unable to take the Queen's throne, the results will carry over unto Ben. She needs to have the ability to pass binding laws in Auradon and has authority over troops in Auradon's standing army." The Fairy Godmother rubbed the bridge of her nose as if to stem a headache off. "As far as Auradon's requirements go, Mal still has to pass the same tests Ben did. I can deliver them here if you would like?"

"Tests?" Mal asked.

"There's three of them," Ben explained. "I failed the last one due to this curse, but since it's consciously manageable, I'm still able to rule the Kingdom. Basically, the tests were made to answer three questions: Will you be able to rule the kingdom? Will you do it right? And is anyone controlling you?"

"Oh," Mal said because there wasn't much else to be said.

"Would you like to zoom through it?" The Fairy Godmother asked gently. "It probably wouldn't be worth discussing much more if you can't become queen anyways."

Mal shrugged. "Sure. Whatever." She turned her phone over, palm over palm, as the Fairy Godmother reached for a different, light blue folder.
"If you fail the first two, you will not be able to rule." The Fairy Godmother cautioned. Mal didn't seem concerned.

The Fairy Godmother withdrew a similarly blue-tinted paper to the one Ben had written on. Ben was especially anxious to see the results. He scooted forward on his seat to peer over her shoulder. As Mal scrawled her name on the first two lines, the entire room held its breath. Then it faded to blue, and the three royals and one fairy breathed a sigh of relief. Mal rolled her eyes.

Ben curled his nails into his palms as the Fairy Godmother asked Mal the second question. This, of course, was the goodness check. Belle and Adam both leaned forward in their chairs as the Fairy Godmother asked Mal to sign on the third line. Mal's hand hesitated on its way to the paper as she raised an eyebrow at the nervous royals. Then she scrawled her name and the date, and the black color changed to the same royal blue as the first question.

Ben sat back in cold shock.

This was Maleficent's kid, right? The mistress of all evil? The one who cursed Queen Leah's entire kingdom? Ben was dumbfounded. He glanced sideways at Mal and watched her tuck a lock of purple hair behind her ear as she chewed on her cheek and stared at the paper. Something softened in his heart and he had to look back at the paper to stop the awed smile from moving onto his face.

While he sat in his stupor, the Fairy Godmother removed all spells and enchantments from Mal, and then Mal signed her name. It came back red, just as Ben's had. The Fairy Godmother produced a gem, identical to the one in her office, and instructed Mal on how to hold it. She read the spell's aura quickly and determined it was the identical other half to Ben's spell.

And that was when Ben had another revelation.

Maleficent had raised a lady fit to be queen. He wasn't even sure Audrey would have been able to pass the test, cruel as she was. And extended from that, Maleficent had raised this girl while keeping in mind she would one day be his wife.

It couldn't have been Maleficent's intention to raise such a morally strong woman. Mal must have found the path of good herself while on an Isle where evil ran rampant. Ben was beyond impressed.

"We've talked." Belle began with a quick gesture to her husband and herself. "And we've decided to announce that Mal will be queen alongside Ben."

Fairy Godmother drummed her fingers together. "I think that's the right thing to do." She said finally. "Unless we wish to marry Mal and Ben and allow them to go their own separate ways?"
She gestured to the two teens.

No one in the room had considered this alternative. It made the royals stop in their tracks.

The Fairy Godmother continued: "Of course, neither would be able to get married to other people until the curse is broken, if ever. So long as Maleficent's conditions are covered, they technically have their freedom."

Mal dug her fingers into her knees. Living alone in Auradon? That was a prospect she wasn't prepared to cover. She looked toward Ben to try and decipher his feelings. His eyes were wide; he looked like a deer caught in headlights.

"We need time," Belle said quickly. "We don't need to make decisions like that so quickly. We'll let Ben and Mal be the ruler of that decision."
"But-" Adam continued. "We need to know by a month before the coronation. That's when we were planning on announcing Mal since we wanted to keep the press away from you while you adjust to Auradon and get to know Ben."

Belle nodded in agreement. Mal crossed her arms and leaned back into the upholstery. The king and queen were actually, by her book, being pretty fair. A warm feeling was rising up inside her chest. And before she could stop them, two words spilled out of her mouth.

"Thank you." Mal blurted out. "For being so fair." She pulled her arms tighter around herself and turned back toward the mural on the wall. The air in the room suddenly felt very thick with... what?

"You're welcome, dear," Belle replied as if it were no big deal.

The sun dipped lower and lower in the sky outside. At first, Mal had tried to follow the conversation, but then she'd gotten lost among all the legal terms and political abbreviations. She only looked back at the group whenever her name was mentioned and did her best to look as if none of their words were affecting her. She was aware her edginess was tuned down by the fact she was wearing white instead of black.

As the day drew to a close, Belle and Adam got up to show the Fairy Godmother out. Mal, too, stood up to examine the large mural on the side of the wall. Ben remained sitting for a few seconds, and then stood up and walked up behind her. He was watching her with a curious expression as he stood behind her and watched her cross her arms and take in the large, beautiful painting.

"You good?" Ben asked in a whisper that tickled his lips as he spoke.

Mal exhaled through her nose. "Yeah," She agreed in a high, strong voice, then, softer and more guarded: "It's whatever."

"So... no?" Ben asked, watching her eyes flicker back and forth.

Mal didn't answer. The muscles in her arm tensed, and she acted as if he were not there. Then, she raised her hand to the wall and gestured to it. "This is a lovely mural. I used to paint things like this on the Isle."

"Oh, yeah." Ben nodded. "For Mom and Dad's first anniversary, Dad wanted to have the library redone, but the plans took too long to be drawn up. So, two years later, for their third, they began work. Mom was pregnant with me that year and the paint fumes were too much for her most days, so she never saw the progress until after I was born." Ben explained. He let his eyes flicker over the frame of Mal's shoulders as she listened to him and took a small breath.

Mal chewed her cheek in thought. "That's cool. And there's so much detail..." She smiled a little, and then returned to a neutral expression. Her eyes fixed on the floor. "So, this is really happening, huh? I was still kind of hoping I'd wake up and it'd be over."

"Yeah." Ben sighed. "But hey, you're going to be a queen."

"Ugh." Mal groaned. Ben laughed at her dismay and, while she was distracted, slipped an arm around her shoulders. Mal tensed up and shrank away from his grasp, but Ben didn't seem to notice.

"You'll be a great queen, and by the way, you did really good today. I know a couple of Auradon kids who wouldn't have passed the goodness portion of that test." Ben told her.
Mal's eyebrows furrowed. Why would that matter? Was that supposed to make her feel good about herself? 'Some Auradon kids can't do this, so it's amazing a daughter of Maleficent could.' "So... are you comparing the Islanders to Auradonia? That's it's amazing an Islander managed to best any Auradonian?" Mal frowned and turned to look at him.

Ben shook his head. "No." He disagreed. "It's just that you're a good person who comes from an entire island of bad. It's admirable." He reached down for her hand, but Mal jumped away and out from his grasp.

"What are you doing?" She hissed, guarding her hands against him and bracing herself as if she expected him to throw a punch. "And you said no before you basically regurgitated what I'd said." She narrowed her eyes and took a few careful, suspicious steps back.

"Calm down." Ben patted the air with his hands. "I just-"

"And for the record," Mal snapped, interrupting him. "Your parents created the Isle. It's their fault that I'm even here, that I was even born. Auradon is finally getting what's been coming for a long, long time."

"That's not true!" Ben disagreed. "Mal, I was just trying to-

"I wish I could throw you onto that Isle." Mal hissed. Her eyes were alight with green magic. Ben searched through them and found nothing but weakness. Nothing but guarded faults. A vein began to pulsate in his neck and he balled his fists up. Mal dug in her feet, marched right up to him, and stuck a finger in front of his nose. "Don't you even understand?" She hissed. "You and everything you've grown up with?" She gestured around to everything around them, the furniture, the library, the beautiful mural. "It's abhorrible." She snapped. "You gave the children of your enemies nothing despite their innocence. Generations would have withered away in misery if your parents and their band of petty royals had had their way. I thought you believed everyone could forge their own paths and be anything they wanted in Auradon, despite where they came from."

"We do believe that!" Ben protested. He reached for the hand she hung at her side but she jumped back like he was a hot stone.

"Don't touch me!" She shrieked. "You're liars, all of you!" She began to back up to the door. Ben followed her in small steps. "You already think I'm like my mother, like Cruella, like the Evil Queen! It's your own fault and your own proposed goodness that made you foolish enough to allow my mother to spell your stupid crowns. It's Auradon's fault my mom has cursed me and you. So don't go feeling sorry for yourselves now that your 'happily-ever-after' has a kink. You deserve torment for all the evil you've caused."

Mal turned and fled out of the library. Ben dug his nails into the palms of his hands, turned, and ripped a pile of books off of a shelf to throw to the ground. They clattered to his feet and hid his shoes from view. He kicked them away and dropped down to the carpet, where he buried his face in his hands. She was so arrogant, and self-righteous and... right. Ben pulled his legs up to his chest. She was right.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, 101 Dalminations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, The Little
Mermaid, or Hercules.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Princess Audrey of Auroria graces the palace with her presence. Ben has more of a wild streak than Mal originally thought, but that doesn't mean they're getting along very well. Mal still misses her home, and she's not eager to share her secrets with anyone.

Chapter Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, 101 Dalminations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Beauty and the Beast,

See the end of the chapter for more notes

True to Adam's word, Mal's door handle was fixed bright and early the next morning. After dinner and before bed, Sophia had helped Mal personalize her phone more, going as far as to add a few game apps and a drawing system. She also showed Mal how to access the music that the castle had purchased, which Mal didn't like much. It made for good background music, but she could only listen to 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'A Whole New World' so many times. She missed her old Isle music, a few tracks of which she and her friends had recorded. Ben would probably have a heart attack if he heard her singing about how 'Rotten to the Core' she was though.

She asked Sophia for a map of the Castle. Sophia texted her a picture and explained that the further she got from the main halls, the more finicky the magic of the castle became. Walls were sometimes not where they were supposed to be and doors only unlocked half of themselves, the like. However, Mal was confident she could navigate the palace by herself. To prove it to herself, she figured out how to find the time the sun would rise with her phone and set an alarm for thirty minutes before.

When she got up, the world was still dark. The hallways were musty. Kind Sophia had asked one of the palace servants to leave the castle and get some clothes for her. She now wore an elbow-length purple tee with several thin, decorative belts crossing her middle and black high-waisted jeans that were easy to move around in. There were about four other casual outfits in her closet now. Sophia was trying to find some dressier gowns for Mal to wear to accompany Ben places though Mal doubted she'd wear them.

Mal used the phone to skillfully navigate the passages of the castle. She found her way past the library, and then to the main hall. An older man with a mop looked startled to see her. She gave him a sarcastic salute when he said good morning, and they ignored each other as she walked outside.

The sky was beginning to grey with streaks of pink edging their way onto the horizon. Dew stuck to the grass. She couldn't see very far, but she did notice the edge of the castle exterior wall was very jagged and the paint was peeling off the edges of the bricks. Perfect for climbing. She made
her way through a flower bed and put a foot on the brick. She'd be climbing on her toes all the way up, but hopefully, it would be worth it. Also, hopefully, Belle and Adam wouldn't kick her out for parkouring their home.

She began to climb. About halfway up, she realized that the world had gotten exponentially brighter, and quickened her pace. Near the top, her foot slipped off for a nanosecond, but she used her arms to haul her body to the rest of the top.

Once on the roof, it was easy to walk around and find a nice place to watch the sun rise over the hills. She ended up picking a place where the front circle drive was still visible, and where she was centered above the porch as the sun came up.

The sky turned from dull blue-grey to a stunning purple, and then to fuschia. Mal sat with her knees tucked up under her arms. She shivered some, but she'd been exposed to far harsher circumstances on the Isle.

The sky slipped out of a short yellow phase and began to turn its normal brilliant blue. Mal began to consider climbing down, but then she saw movement at the end of the driveway. As it got closer, she squinted to make out its shape. It was a carriage. One that was obviously for royalty. All thoughts of leaving left her mind as she watched the carriage come closer to the Castle.

Who would be calling on the Royals this early in the morning? Was it the Fairy Godmother?

The carriage stopped in the middle of the circular drive and a footman hopped out to let a figure out of the car. The palace roof was so high up that Mal couldn't make out the figure at all.

The person walked up the steps and Mal observed they were wearing heels from their shadow. A girl, probably. Maybe a guy. She'd known guys on the Isle to enjoy wearing heels.

The person disappeared from her view as they walked up to the palace doors. Mal bit her cheek without knowing why.

The world got drastically warmer as soon as the sun was up. Mal looked at all the pale skin that was exposed on her and knew she'd burn to a crisp if she didn't leave soon. Her phone made a movement in her pocket – a buzzing – and she pulled it out to examine it with a critical eye. As per usual, the screen lit up at the movement. A message underneath Sophia's name was asking where she was. She noticed the time was almost 7:30. Oops.

She swiped in her password to message Sophia, but then a message from Ben came through. "Are you on the roof?" He asked.

"How'd you know?" She asked him.

"Holy crap, how did you get up there?"

"I climbed."

"Oh my gosh."

She rolled her eyes and put her phone back in her pocket, completely forgetting to text Sophia. Her phone buzzed during her descent, but she couldn't exactly see what anyone was saying to her while she was trying to not fall to her death, could she?

Her phone responded to her inactivity by vibrating so much it fell out of her pocket when she was about ten feet above the ground. Mal cursed, having come to like the screen with the map inside of
it, and jumped the last few feet to make it to the ground quicker. Her phone was fine if a little dirty. Several texts were there, but they looked different. There was more than one person texting her at a time. The message notification said they were sending things to a group.

Ben: "Found Mal. She didn't leave; she's just on the roof"

Belle: "The roof?"

Adam: "Are you yanking my chain?"

Ben: "She said she climbed."

Mal bit her lip and let her thumbs hover over the screen before she typed out: "I'm down now."

Hopefully, the Royals weren't angry. She probably should have left a note.

The carriage was waiting out front. She couldn't see any people from here, so she just assumed that they'd seen her and went on with her life. She let herself back into the palace through the front doors and walked right into a war zone.

Ben was in the room having a very… heated debate with an older girl in pink, who wore sequined sunglasses and a pink pantsuit. Her brown hair was up in a ponytail, and her face was currently twisted into a frown. She looked almost twenty, the same age as Ben.

"I don't understand!" She wailed. "Don't you love me anymore?" She leaned forward and grabbed the folds of Ben's suit. Mal raised her eyebrows and started to try and slip away through a side door. She almost felt bad for Ben having to deal with her.

"It's not about that, Audrey. I'm engaged now. I have to think about my future, and right now, that's her-" Ben droned on for a few seconds about things that weren't really important while Mal made no effort to stop eavesdropping. She began to creep towards an adjoining door on the right side of the entryway. When she reached the door, she turned around. Mal made eye contact with Ben, gave him a weak smile, and made a slashing motion at her throat. He narrowed his eyes as she opened the door quietly and started to leave.

"In fact, there's my fiancé right now! Mal!" He called. Mal froze with the door half open and one foot hidden behind it. She turned around. Audrey, the prince's former girlfriend, if she was to interpret the situation correctly, had frozen in place with her hands firmly on Ben's lapel and her head focused on Mal. There was no way she could escape now. Mal sighed and let the door swing closed.

"Good morning Mal," Ben greeted with a winning smile. And not 'winning' as in 'he could win a prize with that smile'. Winning in that he was completely aware he'd just foiled her plan for escape. "Mal, this is Audrey. Audrey, this is Mal. Did you have a nice climb Mal?" The way he spoke made it sound as if her sunrise excursion had been completely done with the knowledge and approval of the palace.

"I did," Mal admitted. She glared at the king sassily. "The sunrise was lovely."

"Mal," Audrey drawled distastefully. "You have dirt on your shirt." Mal looked down and discovered a smudge of black over her left shoulder. She shrugged.

"It must be from the gutter. I shouldered it on my way up." Mal said, not bothering to brush at it at all. Ben winced at her words and drew a hand over his face. He was embarrassed by that? Oh boy, was Mal going to make him regret not letting her leave... She turned and focused on Audrey with a fake smile.
"Do you think it's fitting for the future queen of Auradon to be scaling the castle walls?" Audrey asked. She flipped her sunglasses up to reveal narrowed eyes and Mal felt a challenge she was not going to back down from.

"Better than being stuck inside all day." She met Ben's eyes after that comment. He squirmed in his shoes. "Stuff like that helps me stay fit."

"I don't believe I've seen you before." Audrey glared. "Who are your parents? Where do you come from?"

Ben tensed. Mal opened her mouth to answer Audrey, but Ben jumped in.

"Audrey is, uh, the daughter of Aurora. You know, Sleeping Beauty." Ben coughed and wrung his hands.

As if the situation couldn't get any worse. Mal turned to Ben and gave him her best you-have-got-to-be-kidding-me look. "Aurora?" She repeated.

"Yeah!" Audrey jumped in enthusiastically. "My mom is one of the most famous royals in the land. She's my hero." The brunette clasped a hand to her heart as if she were a proud parent watching a toddler wobble on their feet for the first time.

Mal stared. "But she didn't do anything. Your dad is the one who broke the curse."

Audrey looked miffed. "Yes, but she is one of the kindest, most beautiful souls around. I aspire to be just like her."

Ben leaned his head back just a tad, like he wanted to groan but was resisting. Mal pasted on a fake smile and stuck out her hand. "Well, Audrey, I'm Mal." Audrey shook Mal's hand at a weird angle and with a suspicious glance towards Ben. "My mother's also quite famous." Mal continued. She released Audrey's hand and Audrey withdrew it to rest it on her hip. "Actually, you might have heard of her. She's known by many names, but she was named Maleficent at birth."

Audrey turned a peculiar shade of yellow.

"You know," Mal continued. "The Mistress of all Evil?"

Audrey took a step back. "What are you doing here?"

Ben took Mal's arm and wrapped it around his elbow. Mal gave him a look and almost withdrew, but then she saw how it made Audrey retreat further. She tried to relax as Ben used his other hand to start rubbing little circles into the area underneath her bicep. "The crown thought it would be an excellent match to help to repair relationships with the second generation over there," Ben said with confidence. "She's already taken and passed all of the required tests, including the goodness test." Those last words he put particular emphasis on, though Mal felt another surge of anger towards him.

"You-you're serious?" Audrey stammered. "How long has this been a plan?"

Mal opened her mouth to say: "a few days", but Ben jumped in and quickly said: "Almost two months. I was informed just after you left last time and have been waiting to tell you." Mal glanced sideways at him. Liar. Huh, she hadn't thought he'd had the guts. The tension in the arm Ben had wrapped around his started to ebb away.

It must have been a while since the prince had last talked to his girlfriend. She bought the lie
entirely. Ben unlooped his arm from Mal's and went to go put a hand on Audrey's shoulder gingerly. He held her at arms' length even though she was trying to lean into him. "Now Audrey," Ben began. "I know this must be hard for you, but I must have your word that you won't take this joyous news any farther than your parents. It's for Mal's privacy protection while we train her to be the new queen. This is still under intense secrecy, but I thought you deserved to know since, of course, this means our relationship has to end. We can still be friends though."

Mal watched how Audrey's eyes flickered between them, and swallowed as she stepped forward and put a hand on Ben's shoulder. Audrey visibly took a step back and Mal realized that the battle was won. The pink princess looked absolutely stunned. She nodded though. "Yes, friends." She tried to pull out from under Ben's hand and reached for the doorknob, but Ben held onto her shoulder.

"Your word, Audrey?" He prompted.

Audrey's eyes hit the floor, and she grimaced like she was in pain. "You have my word, Ben."

Ben released her with a smile. Mal came up behind him and wrapped her arm back through his elbow. Audrey immediately opened the door and stepped outside. They barely had time to exchange goodbyes before Audrey was gone. Mal released herself from Ben and stood outside the window as she watched Audrey's carriage pull away.

"Interesting girl," Mal commented.

Ben breathed a sigh of relief. "Yeah. I'm glad we're over."

Mal looked over her shoulder at him as he came to watch the dust settle. "I'm still angry at you."

She told him. "You ruined a perfectly good escape plan."

"Why should you get to escape, and I have to face her? Besides, she backed down the moment she saw you. I think your appearance scared her." Ben raised his eyebrow comedically.

Mal sighed. "Is that supposed to be a nice way of saying I look like crap?"

Ben laughed. "You've got something right..." He reached for her face. Mal snapped out of his reach by reflex, then leaned forward and allowed him to rub at something under her left eye. His eyes didn't linger any longer than needed to rub at something thick, dark brown, and sticky on her cheek.

"Great." She murmured. "I met the daughter of my mother's enemy with black on my face."

"It wasn't too bad, and you did great." He pulled his hand away, and they waited in that close space, thinking that the other was going to say something. Mal leaned against the wall, but the distance didn't change. Ben leaned with her.

"You still owe me one." Mal murmured.

"Can we call it even? You kind of scared me out of my mind when I woke up and learned you were gone. I thought you'd left and I wouldn't be able to be king and in a few years I'd begin to suffer intense pains and yeah, I was panicking." Ben moved his hands as he talked. He made figures in the air and gestured wildly.

"I'm glad to see I was missed," Mal commented dryly. "Yeah, we can call it even." She hesitated. "Is your dad going to kill me for being on the roof?"
Ben shook his head. "No. They'll be worried of course. We don't want you to get hurt. I'd be more worried about Sophia if I were you. She was the one who discovered your room empty and she flipped out."

"Poor Sophia." Mal frowned. "She's super nice. I like her."

"I have a feeling she's going to start working just for you. Sort of like how Lumiere always talks to and listens to my mom. He's her servant." Ben chuckled.

"Do you have a favorite?" Mal asked. Ben shook his head.

"I loved talking to Chip, but he left a few years ago. He races horses in Cinderellasburg now. He never liked the castle much."

"I see he and I have much in common," Mal commented.

"Well, he was one of the prisoners here. He was eight and frozen in time along with the rest of the palace." Ben paused. "Do you not like the palace?"

Mal furrowed her brow and stepped away from Ben. She gestured around the magnificent room. "I can't explain it. It has a feeling that makes me feel unwelcome. I think it's the fact it was cursed so many years ago. I can just feel that magic and it makes me feel like I should leave." She turned back to Ben. "I think that feeling will fade and it's just initial contact sickness, but the entire castle seems to be pushing me away from itself."

Ben was studying her. He seemed to be lost in thought. "Do you have any magical potential?" He asked cautiously.

Mal wondered for a second if she should tell him, but the Fairy Godmother hadn't appeared upset or even surprised. She swallowed. "Yes, I do." She informed Ben. "Is that a problem?"

Ben held his hands up in immediate defense. "No, not at all! However, fun fact, that means you're technically the first top royal with magical potential in this new era of Auradon. How cool is that?"

Mal relaxed. "Um, cool I guess." She eyed the curve of Ben's neck. "I assumed you'd be worried."

He shrugged. "I know you're a good person." He explained as he leaned against the wall.

Mal furrowed her brow and crossed her arms. "How do you know?" She asked.

He smiled at her. "I see it in you. You focus on fairness and you are aware of the people around you." His smile suddenly broadened, and Mal shrunk from it. "You're going to make an excellent queen. Really." He closed the space in between them so that he could squeeze her arm comfortably. Then, he paused. "I mean... if you choose to stay and rule."

Mal snorted. "I think that choice has been made for me." She stuck a thumb behind her back at the door and began to chew on a lock of her hair. "Audrey knows I'm going to be queen."

Ben shook his head. "You can still choose. And I promise I won't judge you for that choice."

Mal bit her cheek. Ben's hand was still on her arm, so she reached over with her other hand and began to fiddle with his wrist cuff. A thought occurred to her.

"Ben?" She whispered. She heard him make a quiet sound in response. "What do you think I should choose?"
Ben stilled. "Are you asking advice? Or what do I want you to do?"

"Both," Mal answered.

There was a moment's pause as Ben pushed her hair out of her face, moved his hand out of her reach, and put it on her shoulder. Both he and his dad had a thing with shoulders, she was noticing.

"I want you to be happy." He admitted as he touched her collarbone with his thumb a little. Mal shrank from his touch. She observed the careful way Ben examined her and "I want happiness, and I want you to have it too. You deserve it. As far as if you should stay or go, it might be a little easier for you to help me make changes if you stay. You could be an astounding force for good if you wanted. But if you choose to go, then you could see what the people of Auradon are like. You could get to know them, understand them like you understand the Isle's people."

Mal scoffed. "Like I need to know about Auradon. Audrey was more than enough for me."

Ben laughed. His laugh made her feel better.

"I like what you said, about being a force for good. Because I know there are so many things that need to be changed for the Isle. There are so many innocent people over there who are maimed every day, and we need to fix it." Her eyes grew distant as she thought of Evie, Jay, and Carlos. Several ideas popped into her mind, and a smile grew on Ben's face.

"Will you stay?" He asked her.

"I think so." She confirmed. "Am I allowed to change my mind afterword?"

"Of course," Ben responded promptly. "Just be aware it'll be a lot harder to change your mind after we tell everyone you're going to be queen."

"I get it, I get it." Mal chuckled. Ben laughed and moved his arm to loop Mal's through it. Mal grimaced, but let him keep his hold.

"May I escort this fine lady to breakfast?" He asked.

"Fine Lady? Where?" Mal laughed. "Go ahead. I still don't know where I'm going."

Ben laughed and took her through a side door. "You know, it's funny. The Fairy Godmother used to say the same thing about the castle that you said. She said it was almost like the castle didn't want her here. It did get better as the years went on."

"The castle must still have a lot of magic residue on it." Mal reasoned. "I bet I'd feel more comfortable in my room if I charmed one or two things because then there'd be two enchantresses' work there."

"When did you learn you had magical potential?" Ben asked.

"Well, I was able to make my eyes glow on the Isle, but I didn't really understand I had spell potential until like, yesterday," Mal said, trailing her fingers on the wall behind her as she walked.

"So it's been one day, and you're already calling yourself an enchantress?" Ben joked. "Have you even cast any spells yet?"

Mal was silent. Ben began to laugh so hard he had to stop walking so he wouldn't trip.

"I fixed my hair!" Mal defended herself. When Ben continued to laugh, she scowled. "The first real
spell I'm going to cast is going to be a silencing curse on you!" She threatened.

Ben finally composed himself enough to show her the rest of the way to breakfast. Belle and Adam were already there, eating oatmeal as they typed away on their cell phones. Ben pulled Mal's chair out for her and went to go sit beside his mother. The first thing Adam said to her was: "The roof?"

Mal felt her pale cheeks go a little red. "Sorry." She said.

Ben stole a few sausages from a plate in the middle of the table, and then a few strips of bacon. "She was watching the sunrise." He explained.

Belle nodded as she took a sip of orange juice. "That's a good place to do it." She reasoned. "How'd you get up?"

"I climbed the brick overlay on the side of the castle." She paused. "How did you know I was on the roof, Ben?"

Ben raised his eyebrows and sighed irritably. "The first thing out of Audrey's mouth was: 'Someone's on the roof.' Since that isn't exactly a daily occurrence, I figured I'd better make sure it wasn't you."

Belle chuckled. "Well, just make sure you're being careful as you climb. Please don't slip and hurt yourself." She looked around a basket of bread to Ben. "Pass the butter please." She asked him.

Adam gave his wife a look as if to say: 'we're really going to allow this?', but he didn't say anything else.

A few days later, Mal was able to stop using her phone to help her find places like her room, the library, the dining room, and the front entryway. There was no set pattern to the castle beside the four main wings. After that, each corridor seemed to stretch out randomly into whatever space was available. Some rooms were cut into perfect squares, others into almost stars, and one very strange room had a small triangle notch in the wall that was open enough for someone to squeeze their shoulders into. As Sophia promised, the further Mal ventured from the main entryway, the more finicky the castle became. Eventually, for fear of getting lost, she kept close to the main part of the castle.

Climbing to see the sunrise became a thing for her. On the third day, she slipped out of the castle soundlessly and kicked dew off the grass as she walked. She went to the place she'd been climbing up the last few days and hooked her fingers around the brick overlay. She ignored the aching in her arms as she climbed and glanced to the east every so often to make sure she wasn't going too slowly. As she put a hand over the gutter and onto the roofing, a hand appeared in her face.

Mal's grip slipped. "Waah!" She screamed as she dropped a scary foot back until someone seized her hand. Ben peered over the edge of the roof, looking white.

"Sorry!" He exclaimed. "Here, let me help you up."

"You almost just killed me!" Mal sputtered, squeezing the life and breath out of his hand. He hauled her up and over the gutter and set her carefully on the roof. Then, he wiped his brow off and took a deep breath.

"You okay?" Ben whispered.

"What are you doing up here?" Mal gasped as she tried to take several deep breaths.
"Sightseeing." Ben chuckled. He wiped his hands off on his pants and sat down on the edge of the roof.

Mal stared at him incredulously. Was that sarcasm she'd just heard? "What?" She whispered. "How did you get up here?"

Ben glanced sideways at her and smirked. "I climbed." He huffed.

And just like that, a smile was spreading over her mouth and she couldn't stop it, no matter how hard she tried. Mal snorted. "Har, har." She whispered and pulled her legs up from the edge. Ben ran his hands through his hair, messing it up even more than it was, and the irregular look made her heart skip a thud or two.

Ben gestured out to the skyline. "I, uh, thought it'd be cool to join you, and I brought food." Ben pointed up the roof a bit, to where a backpack was stuffed to the brim with items. Mal exhaled and got to her feet. Her cheeks felt awfully warm.

"Food?" She asked. "Why would you climb the roof at five a.m with food?"

"Because if I climbed the roof without food at five a.m, you might've made me go back down." Ben quipped. Mal chuckled. He stood up and the two walked toward the backpack. Ben bent down and began to pull items out. Blankets and food, mostly. His phone was tucked into the side of the backpack. Ben spread out a blanket on the tiling and offered her his hand. Mal ignored it and sat down underneath his arm. Ben rolled his eyes and handed her a large, fuzzy orange fruit.

"What are these?" Mal asked as she rubbed the itchy fuzz off on the sleeve of her purple shirt.

"Peaches," Ben answered, sitting down opposite her. He peeled a layer of skin off of his peach with the fuzz still attached.

Mal tossed the fruit from one hand to the other in thought. "They're warm." She murmured. "Try it." Ben rolled his eyes.

Mal took a bite and felt her mouth flood with sweet juice from the fruit. Sticky golden nectar ran down her chin and onto her clothes. Ben laughed at her. "How do you eat these?" She exclaimed in frustration.

"With your mouth." Ben quipped. Mal groaned. She watched as Ben split his fruit down the center. In the middle was an ugly pit, which he yanked out to reveal red surroundings. She followed his example and soon they were both sitting together, watching the sky turn pink and eating warm peaches.

"You've gotten a lot more sarcastic since I got here," Mal noted, watching a red streak grow across the sky.

"I'm usually one to make a lot of dad jokes, but you arriving threw off my game." Ben nodded.

"You'd probably like Isle humor a lot." Mal theorized. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Ben perked up a bit.

"I'll take your word for it." He said with a sideways smile, trying to sound casual. Mal turned her feet towards him and toasted her half of her peach sarcastically.

"You seem to be pretty interested in the Isle." She murmured. "Most people shy away from me
when I talk about it."

"Yeah." Ben agreed sheepishly. "It's fascinating. I've always been really interested in people and, yeah, the Isle. It's interesting to me, the different cultures and rules and such." He launched the core to his peach out over the gutter and to the grounds below.

"It's a different world." Mal murmured.

"Yeah," Ben repeated. "It's almost like its own country."

Mal furrowed her brow. It was almost like the Isle was its own country. A country run by gangs who existed in a polluted state of deterioration. And with this acknowledgment came an idea. "Ben," She whispered. "Does the spell outline that I have to be the queen of Auradon? Or is it just the Isle?"

Ben thought for a moment and then shook his head. "No, you have to have to say over Auradon. Like, you have to have ruling and judging power. The ability to sign laws and acts into order is just one of the things I know Maleficent specified in her spell trauncts." He gestured to his backpack on her left side. "Can you pass me another peach?" He asked.

Mal dug in the backpack for another warm fruit, trying to hide the disappointment welling up in her. She palmed the fruit to Ben with a sigh. "I was just wondering if we could just take the Isle off of Auradon instead of..." She trailed off. They both knew where she was headed with this anyways.

"Yeah." Ben sighed. "I mean, no, we can't do that. But yeah, I get what you mean."

"Yeah," Mal echoed glumly.

"But," Ben started, then paused. "Maybe..." He trailed off.

"What?" Mal asked, making a face.

"If we break off the Isle of the Lost off of the Mainland, thereby making you a separate queen, then we could get married with you as a Consort Queen," Ben explained.

"Which means?" Mal prompted.

Ben set his peach between his feet and began to use his hands to illustrate his point. "It's a thing royal couples do when they don't want kingdom borders to change upon a union. Basically, you could technically pass laws and rule Auradon, the whole shebang, but I would have to be gone first. Until then, you're just a normal person according to Auradon. You just live in the palace and are married to the king. I think it's referred to as a junior partnership."

Mal furrowed her brow. "Wouldn't Auradon be angry?" She asked. "You lose the Isle and then all I would have to do is kill you to take over the kingdom?"

Ben shrugged. "I don't know how they'd react." He said. Then, he hesitated. "You aren't planning on killing me, are you?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"That'd be the evil thing to do." Mal shrugged.

Ben snorted and rolled his eyes. "No then. Consort queen also means that if I happened to die for any reason, you'd be in charge of Auradon." He explained.

"Ugh." Mal made a face. "All that work." Even though, technically, if he died, she'd die too. She
paused and began to twiddle her sticky thumbs. "How long do you think this will last?" She asked, letting her voice drop back to a whisper.

"A year?" Ben theorized. "Maybe two." He studied the roof tiles and began to peel the skin off his peach.

"And after that?" Mal asked, finally looking up to meet his gaze. He felt her eyes on him and looked up. "I become the queen who didn't rule for two years and Auradon never learns what happened? They go on thinking we parted ways because our marriage failed?"

"You don't have to make it sound like such a poisonous thing." Ben sighed. He offered her the second half of his peach, but she shook her head.

"You're right." She acknowledged. "It's just... hard."

"Yeah." Ben agreed with a sigh.

The sun's rays peeked out over the horizon and the frost began to melt off of the gutters. Ben reached around Mal for another blanket and spread it out over his legs. Then, he took a second, black blanket, and set it carefully on her shoulders, even going so far as to pull her hair out from under it.

Mal fiddled with the hem of the blanket and cleared her throat. For the first time, she voiced a fear she had. "What if they never break the curse?" She asked. "We can't masquerade forever. Are you really going to make me stay here, never doing anything, pretending to be a queen? And Auradon will have expectations. You're supposed to sire an heir for the future rise and fall of the kingdom and that idea appeals about a solid negative to me." Mal tapped Ben's leg with her toes and raised her eyebrow at him.

Ben looked back out at the sunrise. "I don't know." He confessed. His tone of voice announced that he, too, had been worried about it.

Mal continued on. "And if you do make me stay, what next for the Isle?"

"The Isle?" Ben asked, glancing at Mal.

"My homeland? The Isle?" Mal rolled her eyes.

"If we break it off, that means it's its own country," Ben reasoned. "The only way you could get rid of it is to abdicate to Auradon."

"So, I'm the puppet government." Mal rolled her eyes.

"No, you're the actual government with close ties to Auradon." Ben rolled his eyes. Mal hummed suspiciously. "I think you could fix the Isle." Ben shrugged, ignoring her skepticism.

"Doubtful." Mal disagreed. The sun was almost halfway over the horizon now.

"Oh no." Ben shook his head. "Come one, two years from now, and the Isle will be completely different. Trust me."

Mal didn't say anything more. She pulled the hems of the blankets taut across her chest and watched the sky turn its bidaily daily light show as Ben ate his peach behind her. This was nice. It was nice to not yell at him. It was nice to be listened to. She'd never had someone take her ideas and make them into a plan. She'd never climbed a palace to discover a prince. Even the small
things were new. She'd never even had someone lift a blanket around her shoulders.

Mal curled up her feet and laid her head on her knees. The sun rose on a new day and an upcoming queen.

Remember Doug? Mal didn't. She'd completely forgotten about the man who'd sent her an entire paragraph in response to just her name. However, after her first week was over, the King and Queen decided it was time to invite Doug over.

Doug arrived during lunch, which Mal felt was a normal time to receive guests. Lunch was the most inconspicuous meal of the day when you had already figured out if the day was going to be a good or a bad one, and before you had any concrete plans so you could be a little more flexible. Mal appreciated lunchtimes a lot.

Doug wore a plaid shirt that was rolled up to his elbows since August in Auradon was hot enough to bake cookies outside. (This wasn't an exaggeration. Mal saw some of the servant's children baking cookies by leaving them outside in aluminum-foil-lined boxes.) He had a bow tie and glasses, and hair the color of sand. He was also a very nervous man. When he shook hands with Mal, he quivered. He stuttered and went back and forth, steamrolling his own sentences. Sometimes, Mal couldn't understand what he was saying. She just smiled and nodded. That seemed to make Doug less nervous.

Doug worked for the crown. A very small part of his job was to go to all the new royals in all the small kingdoms and teach them how to file paperwork through to Beast's Castle, how to cc emails and be the all-around IT guy. So it only made sense that he and Adam had teamed up to show Ben how to run things, and now Ben and Doug (mostly Doug) were going to team up and show her how to do things.

After lunch, Ben showed her and Doug upstairs and into the King's office. There were papers, envelopes, and little calendar magnets everywhere. Mal made a gentle humming sound as Doug groaned and pulled a fancy black hole-punch out of his bag. Except it wasn't a hole punch. As Ben showed Mal around the office and pointed to where things were supposed to go, Doug picked up whatever papers he could find and scanned them through what now appeared to be a portable, backwards printer. The pictures appeared on Adam's desktop computer as Doug scanned them. Finally, the two men ushered Mal into King Adam's incredibly tall swivel seat. Mal tried to not feel awkward as the two men hovered beside her and showed her how to get the desktop to automatically search for duplicate documents and sort them into folders based on what they were while her feet dangled at least four inches above the flooring. The computer also had this handy thing that made it so everything could be sorted by dates so that everything Doug had just barely scanned in would appear at the top of the relevant folder after it had been sorted.

"Why do we still use paper?" Mal asked.

"Because when a king signs something it's considered a magical lock. We haven't figured out how to replicate that effect on computers yet." Doug sighed. That was the other, bigger part of his job. Working with computers to make them do better stuff.

"When you become King, or Queen, for you, you receive the throne magic, which basically helps you know if there's major trouble in the kingdom, or if a border is breached, stuff like that. When you're making or changing laws, you need to have a connection to that magic, otherwise, it won't work." Ben added. It made sense he'd care more about that information than Doug. Wasn't that the main reason she was there? There wasn't any way the magic of the crown would stick without her.
"Also, paper copies have to be sent out to minor royals so that they know the law is now in effect and so they can portray it to their people." Doug murmured as he picked up the last piece of paper on the desk and scanned it in. He turned to Mal. "Let's start with something simple. Let's say I'm a citizen and I've come to you asking about Law 37 subsection B because my local royal doesn't have a copy in his possession. What do you need to do?"

"Uh, get him a copy?" Mal guessed.

"And?" Doug prompted.

"I don't know."

"That's fine. That's why Ben and I are here. Anyway, you should send an extra copy to that royal, just so it won't happen again. Try and find 37.B." Doug gestured to the computer. "Ben, why don't you go see if you can find your notes from when your dad and I ran you through this course?" Ben snapped to attention, and then dashed out the door.

"Be right back!" He called over his shoulder.

Mal examined the screen. There was a laws folder, so she clicked on that. Doug made a sound of approval. Now there were a lot of numbers. She scrolled down to thirty-seven, and quickly found subsection B.

"Good job." Doug complimented her. "Now, of course, this isn't all you'll do as Queen. There're many jobs. Most of the time you'll be probably be delegating where resources are going and trying to create a strong infrastructure. The minor rulers are the ones who rule over the people as Official States of Auradon. If they're doing their jobs right, you shouldn't be bothered too much with that sort of work. We just wanted to start with something simple today. Some of your responsibilities are making sure good people have power, examining possible new laws for the United States of Auradon, and maybe a few odd jobs here and there. If you ever have any questions about specifics, Adam would be a great guy to ask. I'm sure you know he built the USA up almost from scratch. I'm mainly an IT guy, so I won't be able to do as much, but I'm still open to helping you out. Now, I've been told you're only going to concern yourself with the Isle of the Lost, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right," Mal told Doug.

"Splendid. We have a file specifically for the Isle. It's in alphabetical order, so see if you can find it. Feel free to take a look around that file as we wait for Ben."

Mal quickly found the file. It was very, very full. There were several narrowing devices. Naturally, she was curious about herself and her friends. She searched her name, and several accounts of her mother came up. Then, part-way down, she found her own birth certificate and an enrollment form for Dragon Academy.

When she searched for her friends, she found Evie had the most documentation. Her mom had yearly health checkups, school enrollments, school work, and normal certification in there. Carlos's contained only his birth certificate and his schooling forms, and Jay's was completely empty.

"You're missing people," Mal told Doug after several minutes of examining the computer. "I don't see Jafar's son, Ursula's daughter, Hades's daughter, and I know Gaston has more kids than this."

"That's all the documentation the Isle sends us. We don't do much here with it. Maybe you can change that." Doug drummed his fingernails on the desk. "Hey, can I ask you something now?"

"You just did," May commented. "But go ahead." She clicked back to the screen where she
searched for herself and found a document accounting for Maleficent on the Isle of the Lost, back when she'd been banished. The document read: Target effectively powerless.

"How do you feel about being queen?" Doug asked.

Mal let out a breath as she clicked back and found an incident report where a disturbance had appeared in the barrier. "Honestly? No idea. Don't want to get married. Don't want to die. Don't want to be trapped. It's all joyous feelings."

"You aren't excited for anything?" Doug asked.

"To be a ruler of my old hometown? Believe me, all I'm gaining is a title. The Isle of the Lost pays less attention to the Palace than they do to the dirt. I had more power when I actually lived there."

"What sort of power?"

"Oh, you should have seen me and my group. We were top dogs." Mal rolled away from the computer. "On a different note, I have a question."

Doug clapped his hands together. "Shoot." He replied.

"What if I need to make a document?" She asked.

"Oh, okay. At the bottom of the screen, there should be an icon with a 'W' on it. It's a document writing system. The palace has a whole bunch of unique formats for law writing and declarations and stuff like that. Just because you write a law down doesn't make it a law, by the way. You have to get it committee approved…" Doug trailed off. "Actually, I have no idea how the Isle of the Lost will work now that it's being handed to you. Go crazy, I guess."

"But not too crazy?" Mal asked with a smirk. She examined the Castle Documents with a critical eye. "So, if I'm to understand this correctly, the Isle of the Lost and Auradon are now separate."

"Not now," Doug said. "But after Ben and you are coronated, yeah. At least as far as I know."

Mal hummed in response and selected a blank document. She looked down and quickly discovered a roll-out shelf with a keyboard on it hidden in the desk.

"Are you writing a law right now?" Doug asked as he tried to crane his neck.

"No. I'm just messing around," Mal replied as she fiddled with the font type and size.

"Oh, here," Doug said. He whisked open a desk and started rummaging. "There's a really handy list of shortcut keys here somewhere…" He cursed. "I hope Ben isn't as messy as Adam is."

Mal snorted and began to tune him out as she started typing.

Doug couldn't find the hotkey list, so he gave up. Eventually, his phone began to ring so he left the room to answer it. By that time, Mal had started writing a letter.

Ben came back, but Doug was still on the phone and Mal was typing, so he put his old lined-paper notes on the desk and pulled out his phone to do stuff.

No one said anything until Mal looked up and said: "Ben, I would like to print this. How do I do that?"

"Control key and P," Ben said automatically. "At the same time." He added as an afterthought. He
looked up from a multi-colored game system. "What are you doing?"

"Printing something," Mal said with pursed lips. "Control… ctrl?" Across the room, a machine began to hum loudly. Seconds later, a single piece of paper slid into the catcher, which was already full of many documents. Ben reached over and picked it up, and quickly skimmed it.

"Hey!" Mal snapped. "That's mine!" She pushed back from the desk and reached to snatch it from his grasp.

Ben frowned. "Mal, who are you writing to?"

Mal glared and snatched her paper from his grasp, nearly ripping it in the process. "An essay of nun-ya."

"I know it's not my business!" Ben exclaimed in exasperation as Mal stormed back to the desk. He stood up. "But I got to know, are you writing to someone on the Isle? Is it your mom?"

"What? Of course, it's not my mom!" Mal whirled around. "Do you honestly think I'd write to my selfish, horrible mother after she landed me in a hopeless situation where I'm stuck with you!?"

"Woah." A third voice said from the hallway. Ben and Mal's heads whipped towards the doorway. Doug stood with wide eyes and his hands up in a surrender position. His phone was in one hand, turned off. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Yes." Mal said at the same time Ben said: "No." Mal glared at Ben out of the corners of her eyes.

"We're fine," Ben said. "All is well." He sat back down in his chair. Mal huffed out the last of her frustration and began to cool. She took a seat at the desk again. Doug walked cautiously into the room.

Mal folded her letter in fourths and sealed it with a piece of tape. Ben watched her.

"You know you can't send that, right?" He asked. Mal stilled and looked at him for an explanation – a quick one. He sighed and raked his nails over his skull. "If you send it to the Isle your mom will probably find out you've betrayed her. And if you contact your friends, I highly doubt she'd act kindly to them. It'd probably be safer for them if you sever ties." He thought for a moment. "If you were, by chance, going to send it to someone in Auradon, you should know all the mail gets screened anyway. Someone could have leaked you to the public. Not a problem, per se, but the press would become really annoying to you and me."

"They screen the mail?" Mal asked as she bit her cheek.

"Everything going in and out of the palace, yeah. And other mail places do it too with permission and knowledge of the public."

Mal creased her paper with a line in her forehead. She put it inside a pocket in her shirt and made a mental note to tape it to the underside of her desk. Then she ignored Ben and tried her best to pay attention to Doug.

Ben wasn't bothered by Mal's anger. He'd already had her anger directed at him and knew that, despite whatever she claimed, she was of the forgiving nature. She'd probably be back to normal tomorrow.

Meanwhile, the little he'd read in her letter was burned into the back of his mind. A scorching heat began in his head. Doug asked him a question, and so he pushed his thoughts away for another
Mal blinked and furrowed her brow. "Are you… encouraging me to learn magic?" She asked.

Ben pretended to toss the idea back and forth with a smirk. The fact his humor had returned was a good sign to Mal. "Maybe." He shrugged.

"No way," Mal said. A wide smile spread across her face.

"Hey." Ben held up his hands. "I've known for a long time our laws against magic are wrong. When I learned you had it in you, I knew you could be a powerful force in making those laws fair for everyone. It's what the kingdom needs."

"A magically powerful queen-" Mal started, still doubtful.

"Who will help alleviate racism, bigotry, and the general mistrust of magical creatures and people that began in my parent's reign." Ben interrupted.

Mal blinked. "You're using me as a weapon against closemindedness?" She asked.

"That, and I enjoy your company." Ben decided.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Sword Fighting. Audrey returns and Ben and Mal make snowflakes together. Mal blows up the King's office, and the royal family makes bets on Auradon news. Mal is announced as Queen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was hot outside and the castle provided a steady draft stretching inwards from the outer wings. Day in and day out, Ben and Doug were, apparently, trying to cram everything they'd ever learned from Royalty 101 down her throat and into her head. Mal couldn't even close her eyes without seeing the Auradon Royal Crest engraved behind her eyes anymore. So before Ben and Doug could catch her and pull her back to Adam's office for an after-lunch session, she disappeared to go wandering.

A map of the castle told her that if she went into the North Wing, she'd find the storage area, which she assumed was mostly untouched. Mal thought that she'd be able to hide there and do some snooping before her cell phone started trying to summon her back for another round of 'How many unintelligible things can I say in one hour?'

The hallways that ran north and south in the castle, she'd started to notice, were sloped while the roofs of the normal hallways were flat. She followed the length of a slanted ceiling that must have been made to help giants through the palace and opened the door to a side room. Immediately upon her entry, a cloud of dust flew into the air. She coughed and felt on the wall for a light. It was so nice to be in Auradon where the light switches were actually reliable.

The room flickered into visibility. It was the smallest room she'd been in since the Isle, and that was counting her closet as well. On the wall were cardboard boxes with dusty white label identifying each's contents. Mal crossed her arms and began to skim. Books, books, books, sewing notions, Grandma Vane's items, Grandma Mae's, Grandma Ava's... Mal paused and squinted at a fairly new box. 'Swords and Shields Momentos', it read. That sounded interesting. Mal reached up and pulled the box off the shelf. It was surprisingly long and heavy. She set it down with a thud and brushed the thick dust off of the top of the box. Then, she pried open the lid and examined the box's contents. Inside was a jersey made of yellow and blue mesh fabric and a matching pair of sports shorts. Blue sneakers, a blue hoodie, and a couple of medals sat on top of it, along with a whistle. She lifted these items out of the box, noting that they were clean and well-kept.

Underneath were three different types of swords. Two were plain-looking katanas with one-sided blades. The handles were wrapped in leather - one blue and one brown. The last sword was noticeably more interesting though. Mal pulled it out of the box and couldn't stop herself breaking out into a smile as she stared at the fine workmanship of the blade. This one was double bladed, but with a guard protecting her fingers as she examined it. The hilt was also wrapped in blue leather and had a beautiful two-part golden guard that wrapped around the user's hand when they held it. The Auradon crest rested on top of the pommel of the sword. Mal pulled it from the sheath and examined the blade itself. It was steel, well tempered, and so sharp she didn't dare even rest her
finger on the edge. The tip of the sword was angled to be even sharper than the blade itself.

As she resheathed the sword and put it on the ground beside her, she noticed writing on the leather underneath the guard. She held it up to her eyes and read: Benjamin Florian Benson.

Ben? Ben had swords? She put the sword down, picked up the jersey, and unfolded it. On the back of the jersey was his name: Ben. Mal put that, too, aside and continued shuffling through the box. There was a plaque that had 'Benjamin Benson - Captain of the Swords and Shields team' stamped on it along with a year and a coach's signature. She found a couple of other certificates and even a few trophies before she came across a thick stack of printed photographs. Each one of Ben. Sometimes he was with a team, other times he was alone, or even sparring with opponents in various colors. Each photo had a label printed in beautiful handwriting that Mal assumed was Belle's at the bottom. Mal examined a photo of him standing on guard against a blonde-haired boy the bottom of the photo identified as Chad Charming. The two were smiling even as they were tense and prepared. Mal brought the photo closer to her eyes as he examined the two boy's form. The photo seemed several years old, as Ben was taller and stronger now.

"Like what you see?" A voice came from the doorway, startling her. Mal gasped as she jumped and fell onto her butt, staring in shock at the doorway. Ben leaned casually against the door with a raised eyebrow. For a second, she couldn't recognize him - the tailored man in a blue suit and with neatly cut hair - from the boy in the blue jersey who was drenched in sweat and had a sure smile pressed onto his face, but then she blinked and the pieces clicked.

"Not especially." Mal gasped as she calmed down. She sent him a shifty look. "How did you find me?"

Ben pulled his phone out of his pocket and turned it on. He flipped it around and showed her the screen. It had her phone contact with a picture of her face, and a little map that showed the layout of the palace. "You started sharing location with the palace when you turned on your phone. Didn't you know?"

"No." Mal frowned. "I didn't know that." The phone reloaded and Ben's contact appeared beside hers, indicating his location. This only made Mal's frown deepen. And she didn't even know how to turn it off, either!

Ben crouched down in the dust beside her and pointed to the pictures, which had scattered across the floor. "That's me back at Auradon Prep, where I went to school. I was captain of the Swords and Shields team. Sword fighting group." Most of this Mal already knew, but she knew Ben was just trying to fill her in.

"You've got pretty good form." She shrugged as she started chewing on her hair.

"Thanks," Ben replied. He picked up his double-bladed sword with a proud smile. He unsheathed it, stood and gave it a small swing away from her with a nostalgic smile. "Did you, uh-" He cleared his throat as he bent and resheathed his blade, "Did you do any sword-fighting on the Isle?"

"Yeah." Mal nodded. "Mostly with gang rivalries. I fought with the pirates a lot." Mal bit her lip as she remembered how she and Jay used to battle against Uma and Harry before the two of them had gotten their own gangs. How long had it been now? Seven years?

"Were you any good?" Ben asked, distracting her from old memories. He was refolding his jersey and shuffling through his photos. Mal immediately scoffed at the question and pushed her hair aside to stare at him incredulously.
"Of course I was good." She snapped. "I'm still alive, aren't I? You don't walk away from a sword-fight on the Isle if you aren't any good." She expected Ben to wither a bit and retreat, but he only nodded with a raised eyebrow.

Ben picked up the two katanas and held one out to her by the blade, so the hilt was near her face. "Want to have a quick spar?" He asked, looking all-too innocent.

"Pha!" Mal let out a bewildered laugh and pushed the hilt away with her finger. "You've only had classroom experience and I've fought for my life. You really think you can hold a candle to an Islander?"

"Well, let's make this a bit interesting." Ben shrugged. "If you win, you can have my sword." He nodded to the double-bladed beauty with the gold hilt on the floor beside the box. "And if I win, you have to sit the rest of the day in dad's office so Doug and I can finish explaining the very last things you need to know without complaining."

Mal stared at the beautiful blade with rapt attention. Her fingers began to itch. She stretched her fingers towards the sword Ben was holding out to her. "You're going to get your rear end kicked." She cautioned Ben.

He smirked a little as he pushed the blade's handle into her hand. "I'll take my chances." He told her. "Let's go out into the hall."

Mal got to her feet. Ben held the door ajar for her as she slipped out, and then followed her. Once in the hall, they took up defensive states, holding their swords aloft and examining each other's stances. Mal noticed Ben stood a bit taller than she did. Maybe because he was in a suit. She cleared her throat and murmured: "On three. One, two, three!" She jumped towards him, intending to quickly knock his sword out of his hand, but to her surprise, he saw the maneuver coming and blocked it easily. He looked almost bored as they locked swords and he advanced, driving her back and towards the wall. Mal found herself with her back to the sheetrock as Ben began carefully twisting his blade to make her lose her grip on hers. She ducked under his arm, slid a little, and jumped back up as he brought the blade down, knowing she'd block him and she'd be trapped again. Mal brought her blade up to stop the attack and gasped. "How are you actually good at this?" She gasped in shock as she rose up to her full height and shoved Ben back. He stood firm, and the move only served to push her feet back a few inches into the carpet.

Quickly, she took a fake swing at his legs before she dodged around him and used her foot to knock him down. Ben grunted in indigination as he rolled and jumped right back up. "You play dirty." He accused as he parried another attack and caught her sword again. He once again forced her to the wall.

Mal tried pushing him away, but he was too strong. He leaned in a little with a teasing smile. Butterflies raced in her chest. She fought to keep a growing smile from stretching across her face as he edged her sword back into her grip. Sure, he was kicking her butt, but something about it was just so unbelievably fun. He laughed at her amusement and a blush dusted itself on her cheeks. She could smell mint on his breath and cologne on his suit.

Coming back to reality, Mal tried to duck under his arm the same way she had the first time, but he ducked with her and suddenly she was on her back on the ground with him still holding her in a brutal sword lock as he smiled. Mal gasped and tried to push back as he carefully pressed her closer to the ground with her own blade, but Ben was way stronger than she had anticipated. She'd expected to be able to surprise him with what she'd learned on the Isle since she'd assumed he'd barely ever seen any real fighting, but now she could see she should have quick, fast moves so she could outstrategize him, not outfight him.
The back of her blade touched her cheek and Ben took one hand off of his sword. He carefully wrapped his free hand around the hilt of her sword, around her hands, and pried it away from her before standing up, triumphant. Mal gasped and stared at him. He stepped away from over her, set the swords aside, and leaned down to hold a hand to her. She took it, and he helped her to her feet. She could tell he was trying hard not to laugh at her dumbstruck expression. "You okay?" He asked.

Mal huffed for her breath and her face broke out into a smile. She hadn't been beaten that badly since she'd first met Jay, who was the best sword-fighter on the Isle. "Yeah." She laughed. "Yeah, I am. Nothing hurt except my pride."

Ben laughed and held a hand out. They shook with bright smiles. "I hadn't had that much fun sparring someone since Lonnie and I were partnered." He told Mal as he took the sword back into the storage room. "She's the daughter of Mulan and Shang. She was the second-most talented person at Auradon Prep. I think she's Captain of the team at Auradon Accelerated now." He smiled over his shoulder at Mal as he replaced the swords in their box. "I was the first." He told her.

Mal let out a breath. She was still smiling. "I underestimated you." She told him. "You're really, really good. I wish I could have you spar Jay."

"Eh." Ben shrugged, though he seemed proud of himself. "I bet you could have beaten me if you hadn't thought I'd lose so bad. Now that you're prepared, I'd probably lose."

This was probably true, Mal reasoned. Next time, she'd just have to be faster than he was because he was very steady on his feet and immovable. She reached down and picked up the beautiful double-bladed sword off the floor and began it a swing, even though it was still sheathed. It was very well-balanced, like it was an extension of her hand. She was sad she'd lost it. "Want to go again?" She asked Ben.

"Ha!" He guffawed. "No." He shook his head as he put his old outfit into the box and closed it up.

"Aw, come on!" Mal complained, fingering the guard admiringly.

"Nope." Ben shook his head with a smile as he replaced the box on the shelf.

"Why not?" Mal grumbled as Ben walked over and took the sword from her. She watched it go wistfully.

"At least let me hold on to my win for fifteen minutes before you kick my butt." Ben laughed as he examined his old sword with pride. He slipped an arm around Mal and started guiding her to the door. "Now come on, I won and Doug is still waiting for us."

Mal sighed as Ben flipped off the light and shut the door. "Aren't you going to put the sword back?" She asked.

Ben shook his head and attached the sheath to his belt, which looked a bit silly with the kingly suit. "No." He responded. "I'd forgotten how much I liked fencing. I think I'll keep it out for the reminders." He elbowed her. "Maybe you and I can spar for it another time, or we could get you your own." Mal could feel her own eyes light up as she stared at the weapon on his hip. Ben laughed as she bumped her with his hip and Mal couldn't lie - for the first time, she was truly impressed with him.

At a reasonable time of the day about three weeks after Mal first arrived, Audrey returned. Mal had been about to go outside and catch a break from all the law knowledge Ben and Doug had been
trying to cram into her head when Lumiere opened the door and the prissy-pink-princess floated in on pink-platform heels. Mal stopped and looked at her pointedly as Audrey removed her sunglasses.

Audrey smiled and giggled. "Good morning miss..." Audrey trailed off, clearly waiting for Mal to finish her own name.

"Mal." Mal eventually supplied. She stayed on the stairs, well aware it put her ten feet above Audrey.

Audrey set a perfectly-tanned foot on the first marble step and smirked up at Mal. "Sorry, I'm usually very good at names." She walked up to Mal with her cheesy smile plastered on her face. "But to be honest..." She continued and paused for a second. Her face broke out in a ferocious glare and her words turned from gelatin into something rock-hard, "-I didn't think you'd be here this long."

This wasn't Mal's first time being stared down. She didn't flinch as the tanned girl reverted back to a cheerful, plastic smile, and continued up the stairs. Her hand brushed Mal's shoulder as she walked. "You've got dirt on your jacket," Audrey informed her. True to her word, brown dust flitted off Mal's jacket, and Audrey paused a second more to brush her hands off. She made it to the top of the staircase and turned left towards Adam's office. Hmm, she knew how to find him.

Mal decided to spite her.

"Um, Audrey?" She called, cheerfully fake. "Ben's actually in his parent's room. They were having a talk inside. You can feel free to wait for him out there." Audrey paused in the doorway and turned to face Mal. There was a pause as Audrey debated the likelihood of Mal's truthfulness, but nothing from the 16-year-old revealed the lie. Audrey finally pivoted and began to head to the right, opposite the King's office and towards the east wing, where the bedrooms were. Before Audrey could disappear though, another thought occurred to Mal. "Take a good look around, Audrey." She lit her eyes up with that scary green tinge she'd first learned on the Isle. Audrey gasped and scuttled backward like a crab with two abnormally long legs. Mal tilted her head sideways. "You might not be here much longer."

The light went out in Mal's eyes and she smiled. She lifted her hand and waggled her fingers. "Sweet dreams!" She called to the witch that Sleeping Beauty had raised. Audrey rushed out. Mal heard her trip after she rushed out of sight. She chuckled.

Lumiere stood at the base of the stairs. He'd moved from the doors at some point while Mal had been turned around, probably when Audrey brushed off Mal's shoulder. He gave her a look that was completely unreadable.

"You shouldn't have done that." He told her after a moment.

Mal shrugged and continued her previous path down the stairs. "She deserved it. Also, she started the mess in the first place."

"Yes," Lumiere acknowledged. "But you're the one with magic."

Mal scoffed. "I didn't use any magic on her. If anything, I used it on me."

Lumiere chuckled dryly. "You're in line for the queen's throne. You possess magic. You shouldn't stoop to her level."

"Ah, yes. I'm the example." Mal laughed and paused to retie her boots. How funny. A villainous's
daughter, an example. She wondered how much longer the palace would allow her to do things like climb the roof. Eventually, they'd probably encourage her to be more like Audrey, right? The thought sent Mal into a dark mood. "Why's she here anyway?" She growled.

"Why do you think?" Lumiere looked up the stairs and shook his head. "Trying to win him, even as a side piece."

Mal scoffed. "Listen, I haven't known Ben for long, but even I know that's a foolish fantasy. He's a grown man, not a whimsical teen."

Lumiere nodded. "You're correct. And would you like to know one more thing about Ben?" He crossed his arms and tried to hide a smirk.

"Not really but go ahead." Mal stood back up and reached into her pocket for a piece of raspberry-flavored gum. She figured Lumiere was going to tell her something along the lines of how Ben would disapprove her misleading his ex-girlfriend, but Lumiere's answer threw her off.

"He is most certainly not anywhere near his parents, as the king and queen are in the library and he is in his dad's office like Audrey first assumed." Lumiere deadpanned.

Mal smirked. "Yeah, I know that, and you know that, but now Audrey doesn't, and she'll waste her time waiting outside the King and Queen's suite until someone rescues her."

"And what would happen if, per se, I left now to rescue her?" Lumiere asked, glancing up the stairs to where Audrey had disappeared.

"Why, Lumiere." Mal snorted. "Then you wouldn't be my favorite."

"Don't play that game." Lumiere teased her right back. "We all know you and Sophia are besties." He crossed his middle and pointer fingers to express how close the two were.

It was true. Sophia adored Mal, and Mal enjoyed Sophia's matronly presence. Sophia answered all the questions Mal felt too embarrassed to ask anyone else, made sure her room was decorated tastefully and that her wardrobe suited her 'outdoorsy personality', and was always available to simply talk with. Everyone else, even Ben, had an agenda. Except maybe Belle. Belle rocked. Mal liked Belle, Sophia, and Lumiere, sometimes.

The two friends laughed a little, and then Lumiere opened the door for Mal. She slipped out with half a smile and a heart full of mischief.

Belle was waiting for Mal on the stairs when she came back inside. When she saw the state of the purple-haired teen, she laughed.

"You have a twig in your hair." She told Mal as she stood up. Mal shrugged. She had a pretty good idea why Belle was there. The Royals were overall really good at not disturbing her when she was having 'alone moments' outside, but once she was inside, they were technically allowed to bother her and ask her things.

Belle plucked the twig out of Mal's hair, along with a few loose leaves and some dried grass. "Where did you go?" She asked, thoroughly amused as she brushed even more dirt off Mal's shoulders.

"The rose garden. I hid behind the bushes between the plants and the garden walls. Nothing was hurt though; I didn't even break any stems." Mal answered without meeting Belle's eyes.
"Well, that's good. After all, the price for a rose is a life sentence." Belle said jokingly. Mal blinked slowly and had the sudden urge to slide away from the queen. Belle's smile grew. "Oh, it's from my fairy tale. The Beast locked my father away for picking a rose."


Belle sat back down on the steps and patted the area next to her. Mal sat down with a sigh and put her elbows on her knees.

"So," Belle began conversationally. Her brown eyes filled with mirth as she glanced sideways at her future daughter-in-law. "Apparently we finished with our meeting before Audrey managed to get up to our room. Audrey was upset, of course, that she wasted an hour and a half of her time before she knocked and no one answered, but you can't really be blamed if you didn't know we'd finished, yes?"

Mal's mouth dropped open again. "Did you… back up my lie?"

Belle sighed and chuckled as she straightened her skirt. "Lumiere told us what happened and what she said to you. We figured it was a suitable punishment. Of course, Ben was too busy afterward to talk to her as he was hunting down the eighteenth-century edition of Berlink the Third's Magical Proportions, so Audrey had to be escorted out to return another day."

Mal snorted. "They hauled her out?"

"Not exactly. She would have tattled if we'd pulled her out forcibly, but we asked her to leave and Lumiere escorted her down and out to her carriage." Belle smiled.

Mal smiled as she played with the hem on her jacket. A thought occurred to her: Berlink's Magical Proportions? Why would Ben have been looking for that book? From what she remembered, it talked in footnotes about binding magical cores and resisting spells and charms and-

Oh.

Okay.

Ouch.

Mal's smile faded.

Belle twiddled her thumbs. Mal hadn't ever seen anyone actually do that before. She watched carelessly until Belle said: "You know, I'm eager to see what you'll do as queen." She laid a hand on Mal's shoulder. "You have the capability to make life better for a lot of people. I trust you'll observe that power and use it wisely?"

A weight settled onto Mal's shoulders. She looked up and met the brown eyes of the ruling matriarch. A sudden thought occurred to her: Belle had confidence in her. The queen truly believed she could make something good out of herself. Her. The daughter of one of the evillest villainesses to walk the planet.

Mal's cheeks grew hot. She looked away. Belle patted her shoulder. "Don't be afraid Mal. You'll be extraordinary." The queen kissed Mal's cheek, causing the young teen to shrivel at the surprise contact, then righted herself and walked out of the room, as pristine and regal as Mal could ever dream of being.

Mal rubbed the flush out of her cheeks and then stood and walked up the steps. She turned towards
her room, and let her feet carry her where they liked.

As she passed the library, she heard voices. Even though she knew the palace people didn't particularly like eavesdroppers, Mal paused and listened. She raised a hand to the dark and glossy wood door, and heard Ben say in a bright tone: "What do you think, Sophia?"

Sophia laughed. "It looks very nice, your highness. Very elegant."

Mal peeked around the door and glanced into the library. Ben was sitting at the table where Mal had had her first discussion with the royals and the Fairy Godmother. Sophia was standing behind him, arranging several books into a pile while balancing it on the back of the couch. Ben was holding up a paper square with many pretty designs cut out of it.

One of the books on Sophia's stack slid forward and conked him on the head. Sophia picked it up and muttered apologies to the crown prince, which he waved off. Mal chuckled softly.

Ben continued to admire the paper in his hands. "I think it's one of my better ones." He proclaimed with pride.

Mal put one foot over the library's threshold. "What is it?" She asked.

Ben looked up. Mal was surprised to see the carefree, excited smile on his face. His smile grew brighter when he saw her. She felt a warm pressure in her chest. "Hi, Mal!" He greeted her and then held the paper up for her to see. "It's a snowflake!"

Mal walked a little closer and set her hands down on the arm of the couch. She leaned forward as she examined the paper. It was symmetrical, cut almost like a four-pronged star, with many thin arches and elegant crosses. It was very beautiful, yes, but it didn't look like anything Mal had ever seen before. She frowned and tilted her head. "It doesn't look like snow." She commented.

Ben raised an eyebrow. "Well, it does take a lot of them to make snow, you know." He chuckled sarcastically as he set the snowflake down on the coffee table. A small stack of white papers and many small cut pieces covered the table, along with one can of glitter spray.

Mal stared. When snow fell on the Isle, it piled on the barrier and fell in heavy chunks and uneven piles. It could collapse roofs in and bury people alive, so uneven as it was. And it was hard, like stones. It was grey, not white like this paper, and nothing about it could be considered pretty until it started to melt, and jagged ice formed that little kids would break off and pretend to kill each other with. It was often times poisonous, and Mal had even known snow to hold dangerous chemicals that left rashes on people's skin. She didn't know what Ben was talking about, so she bit her cheek and looked to Sophia for help. Sophia, much to Mal's dismay, gave Ben a sharp poke. Ben snapped to attention, looked at Sophia, then turned around to look inquisitively at Mal. Mal froze under his gaze.

He blinked twice, and then asked: "Don't you know?" He asked.

Mal cleared her throat. "We, um, don't get that on the Isle. When the snow comes it's grey, not white. And it's made of piles of ice." She held her hands about the width of a football apart to judge how the snow came down.

Ben's mouth made a perfect 'O' shape. Mal suddenly felt very uncomfortable. She sat down on the arm of the couch and leaned over to finger the snowflake. "It looks pretty though." She complimented his work. "Does snow fall like that in Auradon?"

"Yeah," Ben said. He picked his creation back up. "Every year, for the first snowfall, we get
together in the living room with the fire going and we have hot chocolate with the balcony doors open." He smiled wistfully as he pictured their yearly tradition.

Mal slid onto the cushion beside him. They bumped hips and Ben scooted a few inches away. Mal personally had thought he was fine where he was. She took the snowflake from his hands. "Doesn't snow get in?" She asked as she ran her hand over the smooth cut lines.

"No, there's rarely any wind and the room gets so warm the snow melts at the doors. We put towels down and everything." Ben answered as he clasped his hands and watched Mal's fingers move over his creation.

"It sounds lovely. Do you think I'll be able to see it?" Mal asked.

"Absolutely." Ben smiled. "I promise. You'll see the first snowfall and you'll have the chance to stir your hot chocolate with a peppermint stick." Mal snorted.

"Excuse me, your highnesses," Sophia said with a little smirk as she tucked the book stack under her arm and moved towards the exits. Mal stilled as the sentiment Sophia had used brushed past her ears.

Ben smiled and raised his hand to say: "Bye."

They sat in silence as Sophia closed the door behind her and waited until her footsteps had become inaudible. Then Mal cleared her throat. "This is paper? How did you make it?"

"Oh, I can show you." Ben moved away from Mal as he reached for a new paper. He displayed it to her and then folded it diagonally. "You start with a perfect square, like this. You can cut the excess off."

He handed the paper to her and procured a pair of scissors that had fallen into the cushions while they'd been moving. As Mal snipped the extra paper off the bottom, he found a new pair of scissors in a drawer in the side table and started a second square.

"So, snow falls like this?" She asked.

"Yes, but smaller. When it lands it's still in little fragments like this. And none of them are the same shape." Ben answered. "Have you got your square?"

Mal briefly considered a sarcastic response, but then nodded and said: "Yes."

"Great," Ben said. "Now you fold it like this-" He demonstrated on his own paper, and Mal mirrored his movements. Ben smiled. "And now you cut shapes into it like this." He cut a curvy line out of the side of his.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Mal set all the little paper scraps in her lap until there was a small pile of white. Ben chuckled at her. After a few seconds, he set his finished snowflake down and watched Mal cut her own paper.

"Here." He said as he slipped one long arm around her shoulders. With his shirt brushed against her arms, she got chills down her spine. "This is one of my favorite shapes." He put his hands atop hers and guided her cuts until a very pretty spiral cut had been formed. "There we go." He smiled, and looked down at Mal. A pretty pink tone lit up her cheeks as she stayed as still as possible.

Ben's eyes wandered to his stray arm covering hers and pulled back so that his hand rested on her shoulder and their knees had a good inch of distance. Mal pursed her lips and let out a breath. The
pink tones faded. She finished her snowflake and unfolded it with pride. Ben smiled and reached over to grab the can of glitter spray. He took Mal's snowflake and sprayed it down. Mal held the finished product up to the sun and smiled at the way it sparkled in the sun. Ben watched her with a soft smile.

Finally, Mal glanced back at him and they held their smiles aloft as they took each other in. She watched the excess glitter in the air settle down on his knee and caught his glance as he examined her. Mal set the snowflake down, and on cue, Ben reached forward to take her hands. She let him. His hands were covered in glitter, so her hands started to sparkle in the sunlight as he rubbed his thumbs over her hands. She broke her smile to smirk at his solemn expression, and he laughed.

"Mal." He whispered. She blinked slowly. Something about the library made the air feel thick and time feel slow. "Do you think we could ever fall in love?"

She laughed in his face and took a hand away to pat his cheek. "Could I love a nerd like you?" She chuckled slyly. "I'm not sure."

Ben rolled his eyes, not looking the least bit hurt as he withdrew his hands. "Ha, ha." He said sarcastically. Mal chuckled at him. The moment was broken.

There was half a second of warning. Her eyes flitted to the left, and then her hand launched out to grab the glitter spray. As soon as Ben realized she had armed herself, he ducked and covered his face. This, unfortunately, gave Mal access to her target. She unleashed the can full force on his hair. Ben yelped as cold aerosol hit his scalp and shot back up to his full height, knocking the can out of Mal's grasp and into the air. They froze for half-a-second to watch the can soar. Then Ben leaped into action. He jumped towards the can.

Mal panicked and pointed at the can. "Mess your flow up, please just blow up!" She sputtered. Ben skidded on the carpet with his hands outstretched. Just before his hands could close on the aluminum can, it exploded in a blast of white sparkles. There was a moment of silence, and then Ben began to cough.

"My mouth and eyes were open." He complained as he rolled over and stood up. An inherently clear Ben-imprint remained in the carpet surrounded by a mess of glitter. Mal guffawed, and then bent over at the waist to howl in laughter.

Ben glared as he tried to wipe the glitter off of his face.

"You're – it's all glitter!" Mal exclaimed. She found herself on the floor, trying to catch her breath.

"Yeah, I noticed." Ben glared. Sticky white glitter covered his face. Glitter was still floating down through the air. He walked over while Mal was still laughing and crouched down to wait for her to calm down.

Mal paused for a second, then burst back into laughter. Ben waited until she was lying on the ground, looking pretty with her cheeks bright red and her hair all sweaty. He smirked. The smile fell off her face.

"Oh, no." She told him. He smirked harder. "No, no, no!" She tried to get up too late. Ben leaned down and shook his glittery head as hard as he could over her. It was like a second, smaller explosion occurred. Mal screamed and covered her eyes as torrents of white glitter rained down around her.

Ben stopped when he felt all of the loose glitter fall off his skin. He opened his eyes and looked
down at Mal as she sputtered and brushed glitter off her cheeks. "Ha." He told her. She stuck out her tongue. He rolled his eyes and offered a hand to help her up. Mal grumbled but took it.

The doors to the library opened. Ben and Mal spun around with true fear in their eyes as King Adam appeared with Queen Belle and Sophia behind him.

"We heard screaming – holy states of Auradon…" The King trailed off as he took in the sight of them.

"Goodness gracious." Queen Belle said. Mal blushed deep red as she remembered her last conversation with the queen. Yeah, she probably looked exactly like the future queen now. "What happened to my library?" Belle asked.

"Um, glitter." Ben trailed off.

"Yes, I see," Belle said.

Mal swiveled her foot into the carpet. "I attacked Ben with the can and he knocked it out of my hands, so I had to keep him from getting it, and I ended up blowing it up." Her cheeks burned.

"Where's the can?" Sophia asked.

On cue, there was a rattling above their heads. The remains of the can had been blasted into the ceiling fan, but the constant motion and air suction were starting to dislodge it. The shattered remains of the canister dislodged and landed on Mal's head. She flinched and refused to meet the eyes of the royals.

Then Sophia began to laugh.

Mal dared a glance upward and saw her friend doubled over and laughing, much like how she had been a few minutes ago. King Adam had covered his face with his hands as he tried to suck in his laughter, and Belle's shoulders were shaking.

"You'll be cleaning it up," Belle told them. "It's not the servant's jobs to follow you around. Ben, you'll have to show Mal where the vacuum is."

Ben's shoulders slumped. "Yeah, mom." He sighed. King Adam finally gave into his laughter and walked out of the room. Ben turned towards Mal and did his best to keep a straight face as he wagged his finger at her. "This wouldn't have happened if you'd behaved."

Mal snorted. "What did you expect?" She did a fake curtsey. "Daughter of a villainess, here."

Ben laughed and started to lead her away. Mal ducked her head as she passed by Sophia and Belle. They got halfway down the hall before they heard Sophia call: "Good luck getting all that stuff off of yourselves!"

Nothing in the Castle was ever eerie. Not even when it was half-past eleven and she was the only one up wandering the halls in the west wing. The castle had magical tones to it. Sometimes, she felt like certain parts were looking at her magical signature with disdain, but other times she felt like it was celebrating the return of another kindly spirit to the castle.

And sometimes, it felt like the castle was whispering to her.

Mal paused to lean against the cold wall of one corridor and closed her eyes. She was wearing a
purple work-out shirt and a pair of grey sweatpants as pajamas. Her purple hair was up in a lopsided ponytail.

Mal opened her eyes after a few moments and continued on her way. She turned into the hall with the King's office and put her hand on the knob. It was unlocked. She opened the door and walked in.

The lights were on; Ben was lifting a box filled with flyers for his coronation up onto the desk. Technically, there were already flyers around the kingdom, but these ones were different and had Mal's name on them.

"Hey, Mal," Ben said as he wiped his face with his palm. "What are you doing up here?"

"Wandering. I didn't know you'd started to move in?" Mal responded as she sat on a corner of the desk. The pictures of Belle and King Adam's family had been taken down, and filing cabinets were in the process of being cleaned out.

Ben laughed. "I haven't. We're still trying to move Dad out!" He chuckled and picked the box back off the desk to try and lug it to the door.

"Pause." Mal rolled her eyes as his face turned red from the struggle. Ben put the box back down. Mal jumped up and began to stroke the box as if she was trying to decipher its chemical makeup. "Take a break; it's feather-weight." She muttered. The box lit up for a second, and she backed off. Ben picked the box up experimentally, then tucked it under one arm as if it were a shoebox instead of 2,000 flyers.

"Thanks," Ben said as he swung the door to the office open and put them out in the hall. "You're getting better with your rhymes." He complimented her as he closed the door again and moved to the filing cabinets at the back of the room. Mal followed him.

"Yeah. I'm noticing that the better I rhyme the better the spell. Course, I can do some stuff without words, but words make it easier." She explained.

"Technically, I'm supposed to discourage you from using magic and encourage you to use your own strengths and talents, but I'm curious: what's it like?" Ben pulled about five thick file dividers out and a bunch of loose receipts from fourteen years ago fell from the stack. Ben rolled his eyes.

"I like it a lot, actually. I feel really connected with the world around me." Mal responded. She bent down and helped Ben gather all the loose strips of paper.

"That's cool," Ben responded. He pulled a hidden trash can out from under the King's desk. "How much can you do yet?"

Mal shrugged and held up one of her hands to examine it. "I don't know. Fairy Godmother said I'd be more powerful if I hadn't grown up on the Isle. It kind of stunted it a tad. Lots of the people here are still wary that I'm magical, so I try to not alarm them too much."

"Thanks for that." Ben smiled. "DO you need to see a magical doctor or something?"

Mal pulled a face. "Eh, doctors." She shook her head.

Ben rolled his eyes. "Necessary evil. By the way, did you know Audrey tried to say you were going to laser her?"

"No way. Really?" Mal shook her head.
"Yeah, but Lumiere just rolled his eyes and explained it to us. We did get a letter from Aurora though." Ben explained as he made a face at some of the old papers and put them in a trash pile.

Mal sucked in a breath. "How did that go over?"

"Pretty well. Aurora is pretty embarrassed by her daughter, but she doesn't know what to do. She let Leah take care of her a lot while Audrey was growing up. Leah never raised her girl, so she spoiled Audrey, and now Aurora has like, no say over her daughter." Ben shrugged.

"Sad," Mal commented.

"Yeah. But what have you tried so far?" Ben asked as he

Mal chuckled. "Um, making lifting easier, blowing up sparkle cans, and lighting my eyes up." She shook her head. "Maybe a couple others. Not many. I fixed my hair once or twice, and apparently, I have horns."

"Yeah! I wanted to ask about that because I could have sworn the Fairy Godmother said something to you about them, but I didn't want to be insensitive. I know Maleficent has hers, but what's the science behind yours?" Ben paused in his work to examine Mal. She jumped under his attention.

"I honestly have no clue. I didn't even know I had them until the Fairy Godmother pointed them out." Mal said, playing with a lock of her hair and resisting the urge to bite it.

"Can you will them in and out of existence?" Ben asked. He leaned forward and pushed her hair behind her ear so she wouldn't be distracted by it.

"Um, I can try," Mal mumbled. She closed her eyes and focused on the protrusions she'd felt atop her head before. After several seconds, she opened her eyes. "No?" She asked Ben. He shook his head. She closed her eyes and went back to concentrating. She tried to bring on the feeling she got when she was spelling something and felt the top of her head turn warm. She became aware of Ben's hand coming towards the top of her head and wrapping around a horn.

"Can you feel that?" He asked.

"Yeah. It's subtle though." It was almost as she was wrapped in a bubble and he was pushing on the bubble. She could feel the pressure, but it didn't have the same contact that skin did. She opened her eyes and felt the horns melt away. Ben withdrew his hand as they disappeared.

"Cool." He said. Mal blinked and stared as he stared at the top of her head, marveling.

"Really?" She asked. "Your sort-of fiancé can grow horns and you say 'cool'?"

"Oh, sorry. Wicked cool! Do you get it? Because your mom is-" He began to speak animatedly with his hands, but Mal quickly interrupted him.

"You don't think it's weird? Your Dad might put restraints on me if he saw that." She raised an eyebrow.

Ben waved her concern off. "I wouldn't let him. And yeah, it's cool. You're going to be really powerful one day. I feel privileged to know you now. Do you think you'll still remember us little people when you're a writhing force for good, uniting everyone and squashing evil out of Auradon?"

Mal blinked and stared. The crown prince? A little person? She averted her gaze to stare at the
He was being honest. He was always honest. Maybe sometimes he had an agenda, like Task 1: Become King, but he was honest in all his dealings(not counting that one time with Audrey). And that he was so convinced she would one day quash all evil? That was intense.

Mal had never experienced anyone believing in her like this.

She drew a finger down the filing cabinet and said loudly, confidently: "We need some work relief; give us only the things we need."

A green bubble surrounded the cabinet, and the papers began rearranging themselves. Things started to fly out: more receipts, tickets to a music concert, a cheap valentine, several food labels, and doctor's notes, and even several bills.

Ben looked amazed. "That's amazing." He whispered, even though it was only the two of them and no one else was even awake or nearby.

"I wonder if I can do the whole room?" Mal furrowed her brow. Ben stood, stepped back, and made a gesture like he was offering her the floor space he had just vacated. Mal got to her feet and took a deep breath. She tried to visualize the room, all its components and spaces, and nooks, and crannies, and then said with as much power and force as she could muster: "Forgive this poor abused space and clean up this entire place!"

The room began to glow green. Mal bit her lip in excitement. Then, all the lightbulbs in the room exploded and the floor rumbled a little. All of the dust in the entire room flew out into the open. From every corner, crevice, and cranny, every mite of dust flew into the air. Mal and Ben crashed into each other as they tumbled to the ground and began to cough as the dust settled down onto them.

"Well." Mal gasped first. "I guess I'm not that powerful yet."

Ben laughed. She became aware that his mouth was somewhere near her left ankle. She had no idea where she was, but she did know she had found the desk corner on her elbow.

They managed to sit up and separate their tangled limbs. "I mean, technically the room did clean itself." Ben chuckled. "It just didn't know where to put the dust." She heard him moving around.

"Yeah, I just need to be more concise next time," Mal commented. She tried blinking, but with the lights completely gone, her eyes wouldn't adjust. She frowned.

"Woah!" Ben said. "Your eyes are glowing!"

"Really?" Mal asked. She tried to blink, but she didn't see any difference in her surroundings. "I can't see any light."

"Yeah. But it's not your normal glow that you usually do. Like, the whites of your eyes are green too. Not just the color." She felt him reach up and brush her cheek. She raised an eyebrow in the dark. and felt around for his shoulder. When she found it, she patted it awkwardly and laughed.

"Cool. Maybe that'll help us get out of this dusty mess." She tried to move and banged her hip into the side of the desk. "Ow!" She frowned even deeper as she rubbed her hip and tried to squint at her surroundings. "Oh, crap." She groaned. "Does this mean we'll have to vacuum again?"

Ben laughed and then began to cough. The dust was still settling. "Is this going to be our entire
relationship?" He asked. "You blow up something and we end up vacuuming a lot?"

"We'll have to hire a maid to handle my explosions. We both know we'll be busy." Mal snorted as
she wiped the dust off her face.

"Oh, that poor maid." Ben laughed.

They chuckled a bit, and then Ben sighed. "Judging by the sound of all the lightbulbs in the room
shattering, I'll assume they need to be replaced. I left my phone in my room because it was dead.
Do you have yours?"

"Nope. I stopped bringing it with me when I learned to navigate the castle." Mal responded. She
reached out in the dark and managed to find the outline of Ben's shoulder.

"Lovely. That means our only source of light is your eyes, which you can't even see. Mind if I…?"
He trailed off.

"Go ahead." She waved her hand nonchalantly, which turned out to be a mistake as Ben yelped:
"Gah!"

"Sorry!" She winced.

"It's fine. Let's just get out of here." He helped her stand up and took her head in his hands. He
turned her around, and she heard him take a deep breath.

"What is it?" She asked.

"Oh. There's just a lot of dust. You wouldn't even believe it." He felt around for her hand with a
careful breath.

Mal grumbled. "Maybe I can just summon a light or something?" She rubbed her hands together,
ready to try.

"See, I would support that action, if not for the fact your eyes are still glowing. You just did a
pretty big thing, and your body isn't used to burning that kind of energy, so I'd just keep it cool for
now. Here, the door is like, five steps in front of you." Ben straightened her shoulders and let her
walk forward. He kept a grip on her bicep so that she could lead him forward.

Mal felt around for the handle with Ben's guidance and the two of them stepped out into the hall.
The air felt much less stuffy. Ben felt along the wall for a light switch, found one, and flipped it on.

The two young adults stared at each other for a few seconds and then burst into laughter. Ben's hair
looked like he'd stuck his finger in a light socket, standing straight up. He had a hand-print on his
face where he'd been rubbing his eyes, and dust was drifting off of him in small clumps. Part of
Mal's sweatpants had ripped along the leg, and dusty cobwebs filled the hole. Her ponytail created
small clouds from swinging side-to-side as she moved. And her eyes were still colored, which
made her quite the catch.

"Gosh, we're going to be washing this stuff out for weeks!" Mal exclaimed.

"Probably." Ben agreed. "This and that glitter."

Mal examined his hair for a few seconds. "You've still got glitter in your hair! I can see it through
all the dust!" Ben just groaned in response.
Mal peeked inside the room and found it covered in a thick layer of dust. At least an inch thick. She winced.

"They're gonna make us vacuum." She groaned.

"Probably." Ben nodded in disappointment.

"Maybe I can magic it away in the morning?" Mal asked hopefully.

"Is magic a verb?" Ben smirked.

"No, but sleep is." A new voice mumbled as they rounded the corner. Ben and Mal both jumped as Lumiere appeared in the darkness, rubbing his eyes. The former candelabra peeked inside the room and fixed an icy gaze on the pair. "What did you do?" He asked.

Ben and Mal both wilted. Lumiere ran a hand over his face.

"Now listen, I don't want to know what sort of fornications you two were getting up to, but-"

"Oh, no Lumiere." Ben interrupted. His cheeks were a very bright red. "We were testing Mal's magic on Dad's office. We were hoping we could just spell everything clean." Mal nodded in agreement.

"Whatever." Lumiere hissed. "Whatever, whatever, whatever. Just go to sleep now and make sure it's cleaned before Doug gets here tomorrow. Go, go now." He waved his hands at both of them and pulled the office door shut. Ben tucked his hands into his pockets and walked away quickly. Mal followed him at triple pace.

The clock began to chime as they walked past the entryway. "It's midnight," Mal announced, needlessly.

"Yep. Cinderella's time of night." Ben responded. His face was still very red.

Mal began to chant under her breath. "Cinderella, dressed in yella, went upstairs to kiss a fella…"

Ben chuckled and joined in. Together they sang: "Made a mistake, kissed a snake, how many doctors did it take?" Ben leaned down and took Mal's hand. She raised a dusty eyebrow at him but didn't take her hand away.

"Look at us pair. You'd think we'd be old enough to not be acting like little kids." Ben pointed out.

Mal shrugged. "Yeah. Especially since we're going to be rulers one day."

"You sure you're okay with that? You get really quiet whenever we say anything about it." Ben swung their hands back and forth in-between them like a pendulum.

Mal bit her cheek. "Honestly? I'm not. I wish I knew you better. But it was my mom's fault, and it's more important that Auradon has their king than that I have to put off my life for a little bit."

Ben shook his head. "I don't see that. And you know, it's not too late. Let me know, we'll find something else."

Mal rolled her eyes. "There is no 'something else'. It's this or we're both stuck. And you guys are really nice and accepting of me. You make this a lot easier."

"We try. It's easy when you realize how short of a stick you're getting in this too. If anything, you
get the butt end of things because—” Ben let go of her hand to count off on his fingers. “-You have to leave your life behind, reevaluate who you are and what you're doing, adapt to an entirely new life, you don't want to be queen, it's your mom so there's that sense of betrayal, and also you've got this annoying chatty prince who you can't get rid of.”

“Oh no.” Mal chuckled. “Whatever will I do? He's going to drive me into an early grave!” They began to laugh again. Ben slipped his fingers through hers.

“You know,” Mal said as she thought. “I don't know if you got the best of things either. I mean, you're stuck with a girl five years younger who apparently makes a hobby of blowing up messy things on you!”

Ben rolled his eyes. “To be honest, I forget about the age gap. Especially when we're both acting like five-year-olds.”

“So, all the time?” Mal smirked.

“Except when we're both angst-ing about and being moody.” Ben pointed out.

“Hmm, funny, I can only remember you doing this,” Mal smirked sideways at him.

“Ha, ha. Says the girl who sneaks out to be alone.” Ben rolled his eyes.

“Says the butthead who uses his curse to break up with his nasty girlfriend.” Mal returned, elbowing him in the side.

Ben took a sharp inhale. “Ouch. Low blow.”

Mal's smile faded. "Oh, sorry. I was just joking."

Ben stuck his lower lip out. "I can't believe you called me a butthead."

Mal froze for a few seconds to process his words, and then laughed again. She couldn't stop laughing. Something about Ben made her want to laugh. Over and over.

"No one's called me a butthead since the sixth grade. What are you, ten?” Ben let go of her hand to poke her side, and then took her elbow in his instead.

"On a scale of ten to one with one being the worst, yes,” Mal responded evenly, leaning against him. Ben snorted once again and held his hand up for her. Mal contemplated it, and then threaded her fingers back through his as they walked down the corridor with dust still drifting off of them, swaying side to side as they leaned on each other.

"You've almost been here a month.” Ben marveled. “It feels like time has flown by.”

"I don't know how you can say that.” Mal groaned. "This entire month has been a drag."

Ben laughed at her words. He squeezed her hand and leaned his head on hers. "It's nice not to fight.” He whispered. "Do you think we could just... work together?"

Mal's head moved to a million explanations at once. She moved her head a little on his shoulder. "You mean me not be mad at you, right? Because that's where your beef is, huh? You want me to be more... complacent.” She untangled her fingers and took her hand back, removing herself from Ben's presence with a little scowl.

"And I'll have to stop assuming things about you and the Isle,” Ben added. His words stopped Mal
in her retreat. "No more comparisons, no more denying it's wrong that the Isle even exists. And we can do wrong to fix everything that's been done wrong to the Islanders while you're here. Work together." He held out his hand again. Mal examined the soft lines in his palm - a royal's hand - and then put her hand back in his. An overwhelming sense of finality filled her.

He walked her to her door and held it open for her as she stepped inside. "Try and take a shower before you go to bed, otherwise you'll never get the dust off the sheets." He warned

"Ugh, I'm never going to get it off of me anyway." Mal sighed. "Goodnight Ben."

He saluted her sarcastically, and they had one last laugh before the door closed.

Behind the closed door, Mal kept one hand on the door and a bright smile on her face. She let out a breath, accidentally inhaled some dust, and began to cough. Shower, she decided. Definitely shower.

"Prosperity or priority, Belle?" Adam boomed. The jewels in the chandelier rattled as both Ben and Mal glanced to the ceiling.

"Prosperity," Belle responded as she stirred sugar and blueberries into her porridge. Adam scribbled something down onto the pad of paper beside his plate of scrambled eggs.

"And would it be better to say: 'the situation demands', or 'depends'?" Adam asked.

"Depends implies a last chance route. Demands implies a fight." Belle answered.

"So, depends?" Adam asked. Ben and Mal exchanged two exhausted glances.

"I would go with demands," Belle advised.

Mal yawned as she reached for the orange juice. Here is a thought: if you go to bed late and wake up early, you will be tired. Who knew?

"Okay, I think I have this now." King Adam announced. He held his paper up to the light. "As we near the date of the coronation of Prince Benjamin Florian the first-" Mal snorted and sent a disbelieving look to Ben, who glared scathing daggers at her. "-it is our pride and pleasure to announce a second coronation that will happen on the same day. Miss Mal Bertha will be coronated Queen of the Isle of the Lost, after which she and the current Prince Ben will be wed at blah-blah-blah, location, blah-blah-blah, time. Mal has already passed all the tests required for royals and has our sincere approval. We firmly believe she will lead our kingdom forward into an age of prosperity. Problems with the Isle of the Lost have risen to an unacceptable height. The situation demands that we recruit someone with inside knowledge to help us improve relations and-
"

"To be honest dear," Belle interrupted. "I think it would be best to just quit after 'age of prosperity'. You're painting this in too much of a political light."

"I second that motion," Ben said through a yawn.

Adam deflated like a balloon with a hole. "Oh, alright. If you think that's best." He drew a line through the bottom two-thirds of his speech.

"You know…" Ben said, leaning over his food as if he were about to whisper a secret to Mal. "It's not nice to laugh at Florian when your middle name is Bertha."
Mal groaned. "Yeah, can we just keep middle names off the charts?" She asked, holding a hand to her head.

Belle and Adam chuckled and exchanged glances. Then, Belle turned and said: "When Fairy Godmother first learned we were expecting, she came down here and told us that if we'd give our child a horrible middle name, he would grow up learning to keep his mouth shut about himself. He wouldn't be conceited."

Ben snorted his milk. Mal snickered as she threw a napkin at him. He glared at her through watery, pain-filled eyes.

"I'm pretty sure my mom was just being mean." She admitted as Ben cleaned himself up.

Belle nodded. "Probably." She agreed. King Adam started shuffling around in his briefcase beside his chair for his tablet and then began writing the statement in.


"Alright," Adam said at long last. Everyone looked down the table at him. "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

Everyone turned their eyes to Mal, but she didn't say anything. After about twenty seconds, the King tapped something on the screen. "Okay, I uploaded that to the Castle page. Now all of Auradon can see that statement."

Ben pulled out his phone. "Okay." He said. "Now, let's play a game called: How long until Auradon News catches up to that post?" Mal snorted. Ben looked up and smirked through his bangs. "I say ten minutes tops. Mom, what's your wager?"

Belle pulled out her phone. "I think thirty minutes. It's still early, after all. They might decide to wait until Auradon is officially awake."

"Sounds like a good idea," Mal muttered under her breath. Belle chuckled.

"Dad? What about you?" Ben asked as he typed numbers into his phone.

"Oh." King Adam sighed as he thought. As he opened his mouth to continue, his tablet began to vibrate insistently. Adam leaned forward in his chair and his face broke out into a smile when he saw the screen. He met his wife's eyes. "Princess Abigail of Arendelle has discovered the post."

"No!" Belle groaned. She sank into her chair. "Dangit, dangit, dangit!" She rehearsed as Ben laughed.

Adam slapped his hand on the table and proclaimed: "Five minutes, maximum." He declared.

"Alright," Ben said, recording his bet. "Mal, would you care to wager?"

"What does the winner get?" Mal asked, chasing a blueberry around her plate.

"Bragging rights," Ben said as if it were obvious. "Oh, and the kitchen makes this absolutely scrumptious cookie crumble cake..."

"Alright." Mal agreed. "I'm going to say twelve minutes and…" She raked her head for a number. "thirty…two seconds."
"Sounds good," Ben said. He wrote down her number and started a stopwatch on his phone. Meanwhile, Adam's tablet continued to buzz.

"What's the news, Dad?" Ben asked. He kept a careful eye on his phone.

"Oh, it's just Miss Abigail, her cousin Ericka, and their little group," Adam responded carelessly. He switched the notifications off on his phone. His tablet continued to vibrate its way closer to the center of the table.

"Shouldn't Ericka be queen already?" Ben asked as the tablet bumped into the yogurt.

"Yes, but Ericka wanted to travel around Auradon with her boyfriend and Arendelle gets a lot of protection having Elsa, a notorious magical queen, at it's front," Belle answered. She sent a meaningful look to Mal.

"Five minutes is almost up, Dad," Ben announced.

Adam hummed. "The post has been shared seventeen times." He told them

"Let's see if it's enough..." Ben trailed off, staring at his screen. "They still have to write something."

"How will you know when the news gets it?" Mal asked.

"They'll write a news notice and we'll get a notification," Ben responded. "Ten, nine, eight-"

"No!" Adam yelled, clutching at his hair in despair. Mal had to hold back a torrent of giggles.

"Four, three, two, one," Ben concluded with finality. He switched into his note app and deleted Adam's bid. Adam groaned in defeat. "Sorry dad," Ben chuckled. "You should have picked better."

Adam reached over and put a hand on his wife's arm. "Belle, please, avenge me." He pleaded.

Ben snorted. "She's got notes for twenty-five minutes from now, do you really want to place your faith in her?"

"Very true." Adam conceded. He turned to Mal, who stilled and looked shocked by his gaze. "Mal," He began, patting her arm softly. "Will you please avenge my lost scores?"

Mal began to laugh at the wretched look he'd painted onto his face. Ben clapped a hand of shock to his heart. "Dad! Aren't you going to give me any avenging requests?"

Adam shook his head. "Not when you're the person who failed me. You can go and burn for all I care."

Mal covered her mouth to stop the snorts she was making. "Well," She said primly. "If we're teaming up against Ben, then I suppose I can afford to help you out."

Ben threw his hands into the air. "There's just no love anymore!" He exclaimed.

"Not for traitors," Adam muttered ferociously as he picked up his fork and tucked into his breakfast.

"You were the one who bid!" Ben protested.

Belle pulled her phone closer to her plate. "It's almost ten minutes." She said gently.
"What? No, it isn't!" Ben exclaimed as he turned his phone back on and flipped to the stopwatch function. He paled. "Oh shoot. C'mon, C'mon, C'mon."

Belle looked over his shoulder. "Ten, nine, eight, seven,"

Mal and Adam joined in at exactly the same time with huge amounts of enthusiasm. "Five! Four! Three! Two! One!"

Ben slumped back into his chair. "You guys are mean." He whined. "I hope Mom wins."

"How many times has the post been shared yet, dear?" Belle asked, picking at her food.

"59 times with 553 comments in all," Adam said, flicking his fingers at his tablet screen. "And yes, Auradon News has both liked and shared the post. Top comment is from King Phillip."

Belle and Ben both winced. Mal looked down at the grains in the table. As far as she knew, Ben and Audrey hadn't even announced their break-up. To be honest, though, she didn't exactly follow the news. But even she could imagine how this would look and feel to Aurora's family, to dump Sleeping Beauty's daughter and marry Maleficent's.

Ben cleared his throat and went back to examining his stopwatch. "Well, don't hold your breath, but Mal's only got a minute and fifty-four seconds left."

Mal growled and leaned over to see. She started to drum her fingers anxiously as she and King Adam looked on in rapt horror.

"Ninety seconds," Ben said after a moment. "It's gonna be clo-"

On cue, Belle, Adam, and Ben's phones all buzzed in synchrony. Ben looked down in horror at the blue notification on his screen. Belle began to laugh. Adam pounded the table with his fists and yelled: "Yes!"

"I won?" Mal asked.

"You won," Belle confirmed. She slid her phone to Mal. Mal caught it before it could slide off of the table and read: "BREAKING NEWS: Palace announces drastic changes to Coronation Day, including an announcement of new Queen."

Mal made a face. "That's not very fair advertising. I'm not a Queen yet, and I won't even be Auradon's queen."

"Actually, you will be," Belle explained. "Even if you're just a consort, Ben will still be King and you will still be married to him. So he won't have any power over the Isle and you won't have any power over Auradon, but you'll still have the titles as such."

"Oh, joy." Mal rolled her eyes. "How can the article pop-up thing happen to me?"

"I can just send this to you if you like?" Belle asked. "And I bet Sophia could show you how to download the news app if you want."

"That'd be great," Mal responded as she passed Belle's phone back. Adam shut off his tablet and passed it to Belle.

"I'm going to take a day off and wait for this whole mess to blow over." He announced, popping all the joints in his fingers before removing a smartwatch on his wrist and handing that over as well.
"Smart idea," Ben said, shutting off his phone and passing it to Belle. He turned to Mal. "Mom usually holds our things hostage for us on break days." He explained.

"Oh, okay," Mal responded, though she kept her phone. Ben stood up and reached over the table. "Do you want to go outside for a walk?" He asked, holding out a hand for her.

"A walk?" Mal asked.

"A walk," Ben responded, rolling his eyes. "Where you move your legs past each other and admire the scenery and avoid talk about doomsday."

Mal tilted her head. "Race you there." She challenged. The purple-haired fairy popped out of her seat and raced for the door.

"I said walk!" Ben protested from a room's length behind her.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Frozen, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, or Beauty and the Beast.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Ben has an interview with Auradon News. He and Mal go for a drive.

Chapter Notes

Guys, I'm so excited about this. I hope you didn't get bored with the palace montage because I swear after a few chapters you will be begging me to slow back down again. Things are about to get intense. Hang on for the ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you sure you don't want to do this with me?" Ben asked. There was a sad gleam in his eyes. He stuck his lip out a fraction. Mal laughed and rolled her eyes. They were standing in a corner of the library, surrounded by camera crews and high-tech streaming devices. wires had been taped to the carpet with black tape and crisscrossed the floor everywhere. The palace had invited Auradon News to do a quick interview so that Ben could explain to the people what was about to happen in the palace. But only a highly edited version, so that the people didn't rebel over the fact that a villainess's daughter was about to hit the list of top ten most powerful people in the country.

"No, I really don't. Thanks though. I'll just sit here and observe you, so I know what to do next time." Mal answered. She crossed her ankles and smiled like a doll as one of the camera people danced around him, straightening and pinning fabric. He chuckled.

"Because it's so hard to sit in front of a camera and answer questions." Ben rolled his eyes.

Mal felt her face go slack. "Yeah." She agreed quietly. "But it's a little different when you haven't grown up around it." She glanced at the large cameras and the busy people rushing around the library, racing to get ready.

Ben raised an eyebrow and reached over the seamstress to rub her cheek a little. Mal stuck a tongue out at him and leaned out of his reach. "You aren't scared, are you?" He asked with a chuckle.


Mal's phone buzzed against her side. "Ugh!" She groaned. She took it out of her pocket and held it out to Ben in exasperation without even looking at the screen. "Can you shut my phone up? I don't know how to make it be quiet."

Ben snorted. He turned the screen to show her as he drew up the bottom of the screen and clicked a blue-colored icon. "It's called Do Not Disturb. You have to reset it each morning unless you change the settings. I can show you later. But that's how you 'tell the phone to be quiet'."
Mal nodded with a frown and took her phone back. The notifications were mainly from the news app and a few text messages from Sophia and Doug. "Why is the news app being so crazy?" She asked Ben.

Ben smiled in understanding. "The palace released all the legislation that will take place when we get married. You know: 'Isle not part of Auradon' and 'Maleficent's daughter has no ruling power unless the king dies'. People are still freaking out. The news apps are going to milk it while they can."

"Ugh," Mal grumbled and rolled her eyes. "Lame." She complained.

"Lame?" Ben laughed. "Excuse us if giving a major part of our land away to the daughter of a villain is a strange thing for us."

"Okay, okay." Mal held up a hand to stop him. "One, Mom is a villainess, technically. Two, the Isle is by no means a 'major part of the land'. Since when have you taken care of it like, say, Cinderellasburg?"

"Well, the Isle houses all of Auradon's villains. Believe it or not, we worry about them getting away." Ben reasoned. He sounded a bit strained.

"Houses is a stretch of a term, Ben." Mal pursed her lips and gave him a very pointed look. Ben sighed in defeat. "Yeah, I know." He sighed, looking dejected.

Mal rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. It's fine though. Now, you ready to knock em' dead?"

"I don't know if that'd leave a very good impression." Ben deadpanned. Mal glared a little until he began to chuckle.

"Prince Ben!" Someone called from onset. The interviewer, who was dressed in a pin-striped suit and had very odd red streaks in his grey hair, was gesturing Ben over furiously.

Ben sighed as the seamstress finished up. "Wish me luck?" He asked Mal. She smiled sweetly and leaned up to leave a quick peck on his cheek. Ben looked pleasantly surprised.

She returned to her position sitting with her ankles crossed. "Good luck." She teased him. His confident smile returned, and he rolled his eyes as the camera helpers escorted him towards the set.

Someone poked her arm. She moved away and looked at the someone with a raised eyebrow. They stared at her in disbelief. They had bright pink and purple hair and bold white eyeliner over naturally tan skin.

"Um, are you the new queen? Cause I thought you were with the camera crew, but then you just kissed the prince." The person – she couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl – asked while eyeing her suspiciously.

"Um, prefer to not answer," Mal said quickly. She turned back to the set. A few feet in front of her was a screen, showing what was streaming live.

"Live in five, four, three, two, one!" The producer called. Mal craned her neck to get a visual of the end of the news jingle before she saw Ben and the interviewer onscreen. She and Ben locked eyes around the screen, and she stuck out her tongue at him.

The interviewer announced where they were and who he was with as Mal did her best to make Ben
giggle. She crossed her eyes, lit her pupils up, and made funny shapes with her tongue. Ben's expression never dropped.

"So, Ben, you're about to turn twenty-two. How does that feel?" The interviewer asked. Ben smirked at Mal and then turned to the pin-striped man.

"It's interesting. Things have been moving very fast for the last month. I'm hoping to be able to slow down a little before the coronation to catch my breath." Ben looked very relaxed as he spoke. He pulled one leg up onto his knee and clasped his hands together as he thought.

"I imagine things have been moving fast. The kingdom has been in shock ever since the Palace announced its plans for Coronation day had been revamped. Now, Ben, let's jump right into the nuts and bolts section of this; what can you tell us about this new queen, Mal?" The interviewer said this all very fast. Mal pulled an uncomfortable grimace, which Ben probably noticed since he was glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes. She hadn't expected her name to be brought up so quickly in such an abrupt way.

"Oh, Mal is a great person," Ben said as if it were obvious. He was still watching her out of the corner of his eyes. The seamstress and the pink-haired camera help glanced at Mal as she leaned even further into the wall. "She's adventurous and funny and she's a very forgiving person," Ben told the cameras. "I think she'll make a fantastic ruler."

"Where is Mal?" The interviewer asked, wringing his hands and glancing through the camera crews as if expecting to see someone with horns and black robes sitting around. His eyes skimmed right over Mal but hovered around where Belle and Adam were sitting, watching the interview.

"Right over there." Ben pointed towards her. The cameras didn't move, but several other members of the camera crews and the interviewer all turned to spare her a look. "She didn't want to be interviewed today. She said she trusted me. Heaven knows why. But she's over there. Hi Mal." He waved. She bit her cheek and waved back. The interviewer moved his hand a little in response.

"She doesn't look at all like her mother." The interviewer cleared his throat and relaxed a bit. He didn't rip his eyes away from the purple-haired fairy, though. Mal's skin felt icy as he examined her critically. "You and Mal get along then? How did the whole thing originally start rolling?" The interviewer asked.

"Yeah, I think we'll be a good team." Ben smiled. "And she came from the Isle of the Lost. She's been here almost a month and it's been a blast. When we're not trying to arrange for coronation day, we're hanging out together and having lots of fun. Every morning she climbs the outer walls of the palace to watch the sunrise and a while ago she attacked me with a can of glitter."

"A can of glitter?" The interviewer asked, finally turning away from Mal. She quickly composed herself and brushed her hair away from her mouth so that no one would see her subconsciously chewing on it.

"Oh yes! She's lethal." Ben exclaimed. "I accidentally managed to knock the can out of her hand and I made a dive for it, but it blew up! I think I've still got glitter in my hair, see?" Ben bent forward and combed part of his hair up. The interviewer leaned forward to examine Ben's hair. It was then Mal realized that Ben had completely ignored explaining why she'd come over from the Isle. She smirked and put her hands on her hips. Smart fish.

"She sounds like she's an adventurous soul. Maleficent's daughter, yes?" The interviewer glanced back over at Mal. Mal knew he already knew who she was and where she'd come from. The question was meant to force Ben to address it, however, he carefully skirted the problem.
"Yes. We don't know who her father is though. Mal's theory is that he was sent to the Isle and later died. Mal's planning on enacting systems on the Isle of the Lost to record who is born there and keep everyone safe. Just by looking at the records briefly, she was able to identify at least fifteen people who were her close friends that are not recorded with Auradon. It's important that we get those records because if our theories are correct, we've only been sending over supplies for half the people on the Isle." Ben reported, sitting back up straight and doing his best to rearrange his hair.

"How can we expect things to change for Auradon?" The interviewer prompted.

"Not much will change." Ben shook his head. "The Isle will be entirely in Mal's domain after her coronation. We'll work together to ensure that both our countries are being run securely. Auradon may expect prices of some goods to be slightly higher in the months after I'm coronated as we move goods around in the wake of the Isle separation, but after that, they should be made more readily available and less expensive than before."

Mal had to hand it to Ben. He was good at avoiding answering directly. He danced around the question, painting them both in a good light. She smiled and gave him a double thumbs up.

"Now, I'm aware that Mal is right there-" The interviewer pointed to her. Mal froze. "And that you've already made clarifications on her hobbies and interests, but I am curious: Can she – you," He directed to Mal "Do magic?"

People in the room shied away from her, no matter how far away they were. Ben drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair and exhaled. "Yes, she gets her magical abilities from her mother." He started. "Like her hair? Do you see her hair color? It's purple, for those of you not in this room. It grows like that naturally. It's really pretty. I like her hair." Mal blushed and hid her face with her hands, well aware that everyone in the library, including Belle and Adam, was looking at her. Of all the things magical about her, Ben had singled out the most obvious physical attribute.

This time, however, the interviewer was not distracted by the emotion play. "What sort of magic can she do?" He asked.

"She can light her eyes up and do other overall basic things," Ben snorted. He was trying to make it sound like an insignificant thing. "I think I'll have more magic ties on me when I'm coronated than she can manage right now." He crossed his arms. It wasn't meant to be an insult, but Mal still gave Ben a dismayed expression. He didn't see it this time because he was facing away.

The interviewer continued examining her tersely. "She looks so... young." He frowned. "Like a teenager."

A lump appeared in Mal's throat, and she looked away. "She's almost seventeen," Ben told the interviewer. "When I'm thirty-five, she'll still be thirty. We're not too far apart."

"Five years?" The interviewer asked incredulously. "And she's not even of age."

"Her mother and my parents already approved it," Ben replied in a terse tone. Mal glanced up to see a dark, semi-flustered look crossing his face. "And we're happy together. Everything has already been set up. She's not evil, and she's a great companion to me. We complement each other."

Belle drifted over in a red swishy skirt and a librarian blouse. "Don't worry about it, dear." She whispered in Mal's ear. "He's been doing this since he was small. He'll convince them. Now relax." She pushed Mal's tense shoulders down.

"I don't like this. They don't trust me. I finally got Adam to believe I'm not trying to steal his son's
throne and now I've got to start focusing on convincing Auradon." Mal gestured to the camera as Ben's interview continued.

"You'll get there. Just take it one step at a time. I mean it when I say I foresee great things from you." Belle reassured her. She rubbed Mal's arms to take the edge off her goosebumps.

Mal let out a little breath. "Thank you, Belle." She clutch ed her arms around her chest and exhaled to relieve the tension. Onscreen, Ben and the interviewer continued to talk about her and her magic. Ben was recounting the glitter story in dramatics, with expressive hands and frequent pausing.

"Of course, dear. Want to come to sit by Adam and I and have a tea?" Belle asked, straightening her blouse with a smile.

"I'd love one," Mal admitted. She allowed Belle to lead her over to the coffee table. As she sat down and looked over to where Ben had let his leg down and was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees as he and the interviewer talked back and forth, she exhaled. He looked relaxed and sincere. His blue eyes flickered away from the interviewer and searched the room for her. When he found her, she watched his face change. He visibly tuned out from what the interviewer was saying and the corners of his mouth crooked up. His features smoothed out into bliss, and he raised a little eyebrow at her before he glanced back to where the interviewer was still speaking animatedly. Mal felt warmth in her cheeks as she took several small breaths.

"I wonder if my mom is watching this right now." She wondered out loud. Adam nodded along.

"I wondered the same thing." He admitted softly. "Will your friends be safe on the Isle?"

"They'll have to be. I can't do anything for another two months." Mal said begrudgingly.

Belle balled her skirt up in her fist. Adam focused on Mal's ear.

"What is it?" Mal asked. Belle swallowed.

"I don't know- has it occurred to you that the Isle will be a stand-alone country with close relations to Auradon? I believe Ben is still arranging for material support for the Isle, but as far as I know, there aren't any food sources or any sort of government system that will be in place." Belle rambled on until Adam put a hand on hers.

"That's enough." He whispered.

She exhaled. "You're right." She agreed.

Mal tuned out. They were right. Of course, the Isle was going to become separate! Of course. That meant she'd have to reorganize everything and create a system and she had no idea where to start.

Mal withdrew her phone and used the internet to pull up a map of the Isle of the Lost. She needed to figure out what sort of resources the small island had at its disposal before she could start figuring out how to organize anything or anything.

Mal looked up and met Belle's eyes. "I need a map." She whispered. "Where can I get one?"

"Ask Doug," Adam whispered back. "He'll know."

"Have you got an idea of what you want to do?" Belle whispered.

Mal chewed on her cheek. "I think so. She admitted. "I just need a map."
"Whoa."

The moment she heard him, she knew who it was. Mal hid a smile and pushed her hair behind her ears before she looked up from her last few hours of work and smiled at Ben. "Hey." She said. "Good job today."

"Thanks." He said absentmindedly as he put a hand on her shoulder and examined her work in awe. Mal didn't move as a slow smile spread over his face. She had been busy. A large map of the Isle of the Lost had been taped up onto the wall, and a pushpin board was absolutely covered with bits of ideas featuring things like gang rivalries, uninhabited sections, busy shops, and future personifications. Ben's tablet, which she had stolen, was propped up against her thesaurus and dictionary. The screen was currently divided by a word document and an article dating back almost thirty years when plans for the Isle of the Lost had only just begun.

"I left near the end to make sure I didn't lose any ideas," Mal said. She hesitated. "Can I share stuff with you?" She looked up and met his eyes.

Ben didn't miss the point. She wasn't just asking to share – she was asking to confide. She wanted to know if all her 'brain-children' were any good.

"Of course." He clapped his hands together and crouched down to examine the document on the screen. He rolled his eyes when he recognized it. "Remind me to tell Dad to get you a tablet." He paused. "How did you know my passcode?"

Mal snorted. She took the tablet out of the case and a yellow sticky note fluttered to the ground. On it was a long string of numbers and letters. Mal picked it up and handed it back to him. "You keep your passcode here. Anyways, I was thinking…" She gestured to the map. "There's tons of rivalries and feuds on the Isle, so it's best to allocate resources based on who's more territorial and how many people happen to live underneath them. There is my mother and her gang, obviously, then Ursula, the dark villains like Gaston and the Queen of Hearts, Hades, etc. All of the buildings are very old, but the ones by the Warf are the worst because the water has withered away at the wood posts. Anything that's not true land sways and people fall through soft wood all the time. So, it would make sense to strengthen that area first. The Warf happens to connect to this swampland here, and where the two meet might be a good place for a farm because the land is level with the sea. With proper equipment, we could irrigate and then the Isle would have its first food source." She glanced nervously at Ben, sure he had tuned out at some point. Instead, he followed all her gestures intently and smiled when their eyes met. She swallowed and explained a few ideas she had to have each person report to a council which would include herself and at least three others, and that way they could mutually decide what was best for the Isle.

"You sound like you already have people in mind." Ben smiled.

Mal shrugged as her neck began to feel unnaturally warm. She looked offhandedly at her map and picked up a thick paint marker to outline a river and an exposed sewage line. "I do." She murmured. "I was thinking of six or so different people who I know care about the Isle and people on it." She bit her lip and turned to watch as Ben's forehead crinkled in thought. She swallowed and plunged ahead. "I was thinking Uma, the daughter of Ursula, but I don't really want to work with her. We were rivals, her and I. Also: there's Dizzy, daughter of Drizella, but she's young." Mal paused.

"You said sixish. Not two. Who are the others?" Ben pointed out.

Mal sighed and twirled a lock of hair around her index finger. "Three others. Evie, daughter of the Evil Queen. She's smart, cunning, and resourceful. Jay knows the worth of a dollar, son of Jafar.
And Carlos, son of Cruella." Mal's voice dropped off.

Ben patted the spot on the bed next to him. Mal sat down and immediately pulled her leg up onto her knee. "You're trying to fess up." He told her. "It sounds to me that those kids have abilities that lie elsewhere."

Mal groaned. "Yeah, I know. Evie's a diva, not a diplomat. Jay is brutal force, no strategy at all. And Carlos would hide away from reality and spend days with his electronics. I just… really wanted to see them again."

Mal pulled her knees up to her chest and fiddled with a loose thread on her knee. Ben nodded absentmindedly. He examined the wall. "It's amazing though." He complimented her. "You're brilliant." Ben glanced sideways at her and caught her staring at a point around his mouth. He smirked as she rolled her eyes with a blush and looked away. "And confined." He continued. The abrupt change in conversation allowed Mal to quickly recover from the heat in her cheeks. He stretched his arms out and began to crack all his knuckles.

Mal chuckled and let her feet drop back to the ground. "I am. Ridiculous, isn't it? I'm confined in a palace where parts of it change if you don't visit often and where I'm allowed to roam free. Pretty silly."

"Not really," Ben replied. "But-" He stood up and help out a hand to her. She took it with a raised eyebrow. His hand felt warm. "I wanted to offer you an out." He helped her to her feet with a blinding smile.

"Oh? And what was that?" Mal asked.

"You'll see," He promised. "You need a break from political stuff anyway. Regroup and redevelop." He waved his free hand absentmindedly at her work as he led her to the doorway. and slipped a careless arm around her waist. Mal briefly entertained the idea of moving away from him but found his arm felt rather nice there.

Ben led her further into the east wing until Mal no longer recognized the corridors. One arm had somehow gotten looped up in Ben's, but she let the other hand trail on the wall and felt the castle humming.

"These corridors are older but used often enough they shouldn't move," Ben told her as they journeyed deeper into the castle. "Has the castle gotten worse at hating you?"

Mal laughed. "That's a funny way of asking." She told him. "But yes, most of the castle and I are on good terms."

"That's good," Ben said. An out-of-place door was coming up. It was made of metal and painted a warm blue-grey. Ben stopped in front of it. He held up a key and let Mal examine its shape. Then, he unlocked the door and held it open for her. The room inside was dark.

"Don't go too far." Ben cautioned. His warm hand wrapped around her bicep as he edged around her a little in the dark. She heard his fingers make feeble scratches at the wall, and then the lights came on. She blinked as the light temporarily blinded her. Then she realized she was standing in a very small garage with three things. One, a very old out-of-commission car that looked like it could be the oldest model in existence on the far side of the room. Two, a carriage, mostly dismantled. And three, a sleek black car with dark-tinted windows and silver finishing. Mal whistled. Ben laughed. and stepped down a little concrete step in front of the door. He turned and offered a hand to help her down. Mal accepted, taking a quick glance around the tan walls and the
speckled painted floors of the garage before resting a hand on the roof of the car.

"When I first turned sixteen, my parents wanted me to learn to drive in case I was ever in a situation I needed to leave, or my driver was hurt, et cetera," Ben explained. "So they bought this and rotated three days a week between Lumiere, Mom, and Dad until I was the best driver among my friends. She's a ten-year-old model, but with an upgraded sound system. I can show you how the phone-connect works. It's automatic, and it has cruise control, which I have a feeling you will come to value."

"So..." Mal turned around to look at Ben. "What are you saying?"

"You're sixteen. I'm going to teach you to drive. As soon as you're confident, you can apply for a license. Until then, you need a licensed adult over nineteen with you. I think it'll be good for you to escape," Ben smiled and crossed his arms. She could see the muscles moving under his shirt and the sight honestly brought a shy smile to her face.

"Do your parents know about this?" Mal asked in a teasing tone.

Ben held up his hands. "Okay, one: I'm a grown adult, about to be crowned king in just under two months. I can do what I want without supervision. Two, the car technically belongs to me. The deed is in my name. Three, yes. I told my parents."

Mal laughed. "Well then, your highness. Are you going to show me how to drive?" She crossed her arms and smirked. Ben rolled his eyes and went to open the driver's side door for her. He held out his hand and squeezed her hand as he helped her inside. He shut the door for her and walked around the car to get in on the other side. Mal quickly ran her fingers through her hair and took a moment to calm down as he opened the other door and climbed in.

There was a short instruction cue where he explained where to put her hands and what the different gears and systems of the car were. He took her phone and turned the shuffle mode on in her music app. She didn't have very many favorites yet. After a long while, she opened the garage door, turned on the car, and with Ben's instructions managed to back up and into a hidden driveway. She pulled out too fast, and Ben leaned over to help her readjust the steering, but Mal was overall quickly getting used to it. Ben navigated her to a back entrance of the palace grounds, where a security guard was on duty. He stopped them before they could leave.

When Mal rolled down the window, she recognized him immediately. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's you!"

Outside was the security guard who had reassured Mal in the car on her way here. He smiled to see her. "Miss Mal." He said softly. "I heard you've been climbing the palace walls. Are you also driving now?"

"We'll see." Ben laughed. "That's the general idea."

The security guard smiled and withdrew. "Sorry for stopping you. I just need to know who comes and goes. Have a nice trip."

"Wait!" Mal said. The guard raised a questioning eyebrow. Mal fumbled to put the car into park and then searched her pockets. "Ben," She turned urgently to him. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Ben pulled it out of his chest pocket. "Um... there!" He proclaimed, handing it off to her. "It's unlocked."

"Thanks." Mal turned around to face the guard. "What's your name?" She asked, readying the on-
"A-t-t… got it!" Mal turned and handed Ben's phone back to him. "This man is my favorite guard. He's the first person from Auradon to show me an ounce of compassion."

Ben smiled. He reached over Mal and shook Stewart's hand. Mal caught a whiff of his cologne as Ben withdrew. "Nice to meet you! Are you free on October twelfth?"

Stewart laughed. "Coronation day? Doubtful."

Ben gave a little smirk like he had an idea and was already scheming. "Oh, well, maybe we'll be in touch soon anyway."

Stewart frowned in confusion. Ben leaned back into his seat. Mal raised an eyebrow at Ben but smiled at Stewart. "It was nice to see you again." She told him.

Stewart laughed. "You as well, Miss Mal. Have a lovely rendezvous."

Mal put the car in drive and began to pull away. Stewart stepped away from the car and waved as the future King and Queen left the palace grounds. Mal rolled up the window as soon as they were out of earshot. "What was that about?" She asked Ben.

"Just an idea." He said. "Now, remember how I showed you your blinker? You're going to want to turn left up here."

Mal watched the outside pass in an intense feeling of excitement. After all, this was the first time she'd been out of the palace in almost a month and a half. Outside, change was working her magic. Summer was fading and preparing to give way to September. The nights had started to get chilly again.

The inside of the car smelled like rainwater and new leather. Mal wondered how long the car had sat unused in the garage. It didn't seem like Ben took it out very often.

They seemed to be going through a small part of a forest, with thick tree trunks creating shadowy, imposing lines outside. Ben gave instructions every once in a while, but for the most part, the path they took was made of long, straight lines. He was simply letting her get used to the vehicle.

They didn't talk much, mostly because Mal was focused on the road and taking it all in. Most of the time, Mal could feel Ben's eyes on her as she drove. Whether he was making sure she was okay with the car or whether he was observing her herself, she couldn't tell, but her cheeks grew warm every single time she caught a glimpse of him.

The clock ticked toward the middle hours of the night, and after long last Ben murmured: "It's around the next bend. Slow down just a little. You're going to be turning left."

Mal eased on the break as they went around a large boulder, which masked what was on the other side. To the right was the forest, continuing outwards. To the left was a grassy area with tire tracks imprinted in the grass. It was a small hill, mostly level on the top, but quickly sloping down into a river. Mal did her best to follow the tracks on the grass, pulling clear of the road. Ben showed her how to pull the parking break into place and turn the parking lights on. She cracked the windows open, and a crisp breeze floated in.

"This is a nice place." She observed, setting the chair back a bit. She folded her hands in her lap
and listened to the sounds of the river outside. It occurred to Mal that they were very, very alone out here. She looked over at Ben, who was relaxing against his seat and looking up at the stars outside. He looked like something normal and something sweet. Her eyes combed over his hair and settled onto his mouth. He glanced over and caught her staring with a smirk. Her breath hitched a little, but she hoped he didn't hear.

Ben nodded in agreement. "My mom took me here first. I played my music too loud and almost hit a deer." He glanced sideways at her with a goofy smile. Something told Mal he knew she'd been admiring him.

Mal busted out laughing at his story. "Sounds like a brilliant first-time driver. I feel very comfortable with you teaching me." She fiddled with the heat warmers so they were blowing full-blast on her feet.

"Yeah, I wasn't the best. But hey, I got better." Ben's hand fumbled in the empty center console as he gazed out at the river. Mal raised an eyebrow at him. She yawned a little and leaned against the seat. Her eyelids felt a little heavy all of the sudden.

Ben's skin brushed hers and she peeked an eye open. He took her hand under her own intense scrutiny and looked out the window. His cheeks had a new color in them. She laughed at him. "I wondered why you were messing in the glovebox." She told him.

"You moved your hand." He muttered accusingly as he threaded his fingers through hers. The feeling sent tingles up her nerves. He turned back to her. "Tired?" He asked.

Mal stifled a yawn. "A little. I was on a kick with all my planning, but I'm winding down now." She squeezed his hand experimentally and laid her head back against the seat. His thumb started tracing little patterns on her hand.

"Driving always helped me relax," Ben admitted. A smile pulled at his lips. Mal watched his mouth as his smile turned into a smirk. She only met his eyes when he chuckled at her. "Do you think you'll be able to make it back?" He asked, rubbing a thumb over her hand.

She sat back up and set her other hand on her chin, with her elbow on the armrest. Why was it so hard to breathe? Just a month ago she'd been mad at him for touching her. But he was so real now, in front of her. So real and warm and cute. She let out a little breath. "No clue." She admitted as she shrugged. "Maybe you should drive."

"Maybe." He brushed her purple hair behind her ear. Mal did her best to show no reaction. Not a muscle twitch, nothing short of a blink. The tension intensified.

"So, tell me, Ben," She drawled out, breaking the silence. "Do you usually bring unsuspecting, young teenage girls here?"

Ben laughed. He laughed so hard Mal thought he might choke. She leaned back when she felt his warm breath hit her chin. "Only the future queens." He murmured. Laugh lines were creased around his eyes. His smile faded a bit and he let his gaze drop with a guilty look. "I forget you're a teenager."

"Well, I forget you're of coronation age now." Mal shrugged. "You still act like a kid."

Ben's face once again spread into a smile and his laughter filled the car, making her curl her toes. "Ouch!" He declared. "All welcome Mal, leading Auradon into a new age of brutality with her cruel words."
Mal chuckled. "So, the future queens." She said, returning them to their previous conversation. "I thought I was the only one of those?" She asked.

"You are." He assured her softly. A little color appeared in his cheeks. The hand he'd used to brush her hair back came down and traced her arm to find her other hand. Ben leaned in a little. Mal watched him come closer. She was deftly aware there was a certain amount of distance between them. A hand's width narrowed down into two fingers worth of space. He froze, waiting for her. The air outside suddenly seemed a lot colder with his warm breath beside her mouth. "Too fast still?" He whispered.

She couldn't stop the dry laugh that escaped her throat. Mal clutched his hands and let herself drift the final inch-and-a-half. They kissed. It was pretty chaste, as far as kisses go. No tongue, no weird breath noises. There weren't even any sparks. Just a peck that crossed the ten-second timer and started a direct line for twenty. When she leaned back, she wasn't huffing for her breath. She only smirked at the future king, who looked surprised, and said: "You're driving back."

He laughed, released her hands, and unbuckled himself. She slipped out of the car before he could make it all the way around to let her out and shut the door. Before they passed each other, he stopped her in front of the dim headlights, tilted her head up just a fraction, and gave her another quick peck that brought a warmth to her cheeks. They got into the car, she buckled up, leaned the seat back a little, and closed her eyes as Ben pulled out and began the trip back to the castle.

She faded in and out of reality for a little while but became aware at some point that Ben was driving with one hand on the wheel and one hand holding hers. It felt nice. Natural, even. He got them back to the palace and opened her door for her. She woke up enough to walk back to her room, and before he left he gave her one more small kiss.

They'd crossed lines that night. But… good lines. For the first time, she felt content in the situation, however horrible it may be.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Beauty and the Beast, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, the Little Mermaid, Alice in Wonderland, Hercules, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Aladdin, and 101 Dalmatians.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Bal wedding and Coronation blessings. Reception. Major Foreshadowing includes the Coronation Blessings, the conversation with the Enchantress, Mal's Bouquet and who catches it(And who doesn't catch the Garter!).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-Lots of you may be angry at me for having this chapter so early in the plot with Mal still being quite young. Sorry, but it has to be this way so that we can start moving onto war chapters and massive magical happenstance.-

The leaves in Auradon frosted into a golden and scarlet pointillism masterpiece. Mal quit her morning climbs to the roof because the frost would stick to the bricks and make them slippery. Instead she and Ben went out for short drives and Mal locked herself in her room to pour over her plans for the Isle of the Lost.

September turned into October.

Mal's things slowly vanished from her room. Not everything, but outfits and toiletries and books gradually disappeared. Pictures from the walls, her favorite blanket from her bed, and finally her phone charger. Mal didn't panic much, because she knew where she'd find everything. The same thing was happening to Ben's room. All their things were being moved into a suite with an attached living room and a large bathroom fitted with a jet tub. King Adam and Queen Belle had vacated the Master Suite and downsized to something closer to the front of the castle. Adam's office had been emptied except for a couple of important copies of legislature and things Ben had put there himself. Doug had been at the castle for a solid eight hours on September thirtieth scanning everything in Adam's office into his computer and sorting it all into usable formats.

Still, it was awkward for Mal when she walked into their room to plug her phone in and found Ben muttering under his breath as he tried to hunt down a pair of socks. She wasn't ready to be sharing her living space.

The last night she spent in her own room passed in the blink of an eye. She laid down to close her eyes, and then woke up to Belle and Sophia shaking her gently. The room wasn't even light yet. It was the sort of hour that Mal usually woke up to climb the palace roof, except now the time was spent cramming as many energy drinks as possible into her and scrubbing all the dirt out from under her fingernails. Sophia and Belle teamed up to help Mal wash up, paint her nails a nude color, and braid her hair up. Sophia spent a half hour on her curls alone.

Her eyeliner was so thin it was almost invisible. They used white eyeshadow and brushed delicate sparkles across her nose and cheekbones. A pretty rose color was applied to her mouth, and more red was added to her cheek color so that no matter how pale she was underneath all that makeup, the audience wouldn't be able to tell.

Belle had offered Mal her own wedding gown. It was cinched at the hips and stopped above her
ankles because Belle had been afraid of tripping back when she'd been a bride. Mal was only a few inches shorter, so Sophia hemmed up the base as Belle helped Mal into the white satin slippers they'd found. Mal was just grateful she wouldn't have to wear any sort of killer heels during this ordeal.

The sun climbed higher. An hour before the carriage was to pick them up and take them to the coronation hall, Sophia and Belle laid a thin line of white stones across Mal's neck and helped her glue on little diamonds for earrings since she didn't have holes in her ears. They moved the mirror and helped Mal sit down on the edge of her bed to examine her reflection before they left her alone to think.

Mal felt a little numb. Her fingers were chilly. She stared at her reflection and realized the sight didn't mean all that much to her. She could have been dressed in street clothes and not have cared.

She fumbled with her numb hands and then managed to locate her cell phone on the bed beside her. Sophia had brought it down from the Master Suite so that Mal could watch videos and listen to music while they worked on her.

'Are you ready?' She texted Ben.

A small notification popped up that the message delivered, and then that it had been read. 'Are you talking ready-to-leave or emotionally prepared for this?' He asked.

Mal's fingers hovered over the screen before she wrote: 'I meant ready to leave.'

Ben replied: 'Yeah, I am. I'm just sitting and waiting for everyone.'

'Sooo,' Mal started. 'Are you ready for this?'

'I don't know. Are you?' He asked.

She imagined Ben sitting on the side of his bed just like she was, drumming his fingers on his screen while his expression remained numb. The thought made her heart feel a little warmer. She sent back a message she hadn't yet admitted to herself: 'I don't know yet. But I have a feeling that things will work out.'

'Even for a daughter of Maleficent?' Ben asked.

Several conflicting feelings poked up in Mal's chest, and she wondered if it was too late to call everything off, do everything in secret, and never become a queen at all. 'Well, happily-ever-after is supposed to be a thing, yeah?' She responded.

'It is.' Ben confirmed. 'And we'll get there one day. The curse will be broken, and you won't have to put up with me.'

'You make it sound like you're the worst person in Auradon to get along with.' Mal pondered. 'Just being around you and your family is really making up for this awful deal.'

Three grey thinking dots appeared from Ben before a new message downloaded. 'It could be a lot worse. I could be getting hitched to a vile, controlling daughter of a villainess who is actively seeking to get her hands on the crown, so she can bring her mother over, murder me, and unleash evil on my kingdom.'

She bit back a smile. 'Aren't you?' She asked. Then, before he could respond, she said: "I agree though. I mean, I could have been married in secret three months ago, before being assassinated by
the Auradonian guards, and maybe been assaulted several times and tortured brutally before my entrails were left to dry out in a museum.'

'You know Auradon doesn't do that, right?' She pictured Ben rolling his eyes and chuckled.

'I will gladly fight you on this argument on any day that is not our wedding day/your coronation day.' She reprimanded him. 'Which reminds me, are you ready to be King?'

'Are you ready to be queen?' He returned.

A knock echoed at Mal's door. Sophia poked her head in. She was wearing a blue long-sleeved dress and had braided her black hair. "Are you ready to go?" She asked Mal.

"Yes," Mal answered. She looked back down at her screen. 'I'll have to be – Sophia's here now. See you there?'

'I'll look for the vision in white.'

'That sounds like a vision of death.'

Of all the things Mal had to do that morning, getting into the carriage was one of the hardest.

Auradon had this thing for open carriages and convertible cars. Mal personally saw it as a massive safety hazard, but it was fun for the people to throw flowers and other things at them as they came, which sounded like a second, more versatile hazard. Currently, the danger was trying to navigate the dress so a) she didn't fall on her freshly done-up face and b) So that there'd still be room for Ben.

The extra few inches off the ground didn't help much on the stairs, and the layers of fabric made it hard to lift on the first try. The dress had a natural twirl to it that made it billow out when she sat down. After she survived the climb up into the carriage, she struggled to move the fabric to her liking. She growled in frustration at the outfit.

"If I ever have to attend a fancy thing like this again," She told Sophia, "Remind me to get a dress like Queen Elsa's, with the slit. No more poof."

"No more poof." Sophia agreed with a smile. Mal felt more like her friend was teasing her than supporting her.

Sophia hopped down and went to stand by Belle. They began to talk animatedly. Mal quietly looked down at her hands and tuned them out. Not for the first time, Mal thought of her friends. It baffled her how she'd never once called them friends when she'd lived on the Isle, and then suddenly they'd appeared in her vocabulary as friends the moment she'd left the Isle behind in her heart.

She missed them. There was no way around it. And she was feeling their absence more than ever. Today, if they hadn't already, they'd learn of her treason to her mom. Hopefully, they'd forgive her if she ever managed to contact them through her plans with the Isle.

Across the courtyard, Ben walked in. He took a few solemn steps forward and smiled up at her. He sure looked a lot more confident than she felt. He was dressed in his very best, brand-new dark suit with a grey tie and a gold earpiece clipped onto the top of his ear.

He climbed the stairs with ease and sat next to her. "Hey." He said.
"Hey." She said. There was nothing more to say.

Adam, who had escorted Ben, went to stand by Belle. Sophia left the Queen's side and went to the side of the carriage. "You'll have to help Mal down," Sophia told Ben. "She had a little trouble getting up with the dress. Hopefully going down will be easier." She gave Mal a smile.


"Not long." Sophia pointed across the courtyard to where the driver was walking towards them. "They're about to open the doors."

She hopped off the stairs and Mal swallowed nervously. It was okay. Okay? Okay.

She turned to Ben. It felt like someone was pulling her ribcage apart. The lights seemed bright again. "Ben." She whisper-gasped.

He examined her in concern and put a hand on her cheek. "Are you okay?" He asked.

She shook her head, feeling a bit like a fish gasping for breath. "I- I'm not ready. Ben, I don't want to marry you yet." Her lower lip wobbled and she forced her mouth shut.

It wasn't a call to cancel the coronation. It wasn't even her quitting. If anything, it was a subtle acceptance of something she hadn't ever stopped to consider before. She and Ben were in this together, for better or for worse. And if things had been different and she had a true choice in the matter, she might have chosen him anyway. The world would never know.

"I mean, what I'm trying to say-" She tried to fix it, but he held a hand up.

"I know." He interrupted. "I'm not ready either. I lied. I don't want to marry you yet either."

His honesty brought tears to her eyes. They were just kids, her especially. Their hands fumbled in their laps for a second, then they reached out to grab onto each other. Both of their hands were cold and clammy. "We're going to go through with this?" She asked him.

"Last chance." He responded.

"I'm okay." She lied.

"Me too." He lied.

"Let's do this, then." She sighed. He smiled, used her hand to pull her against him, and put an arm around her shoulder. She leaned against him as the driver climbed up, waved, and the carriage began to move forward.

"This is the first time Auradon will see you." He muttered in her ear as they waved to Belle, Adam, Sophia, and Lumiere down on the sidewalk. Lumiere had appeared behind Adam a few seconds after she and Ben had started talking.

"I hope I make a good impression," Mal muttered back. He chuckled. She felt their fingers moving against each other, intertwining. The contact helped her feel steadier. She took several deep breaths.

"You'll be great." He assured her.

The route was quiet for the first few minutes. Then, Mal heard a low roar begin. It continued to get louder, and after a few blocks, Mal realized it was the crowd. Her breath caught in her throat.
They went under an archway and into a wide expanse of color and light and sound. People cheered as they went by. White petals rained down from the sky. Mal sat, stunned, as she watched people wave enthusiastically and cheer. Children squealed as they saw the royal carriage coming. Older women and mothers stood in groups with wide-brimmed sunhats to smile at her and Ben as they passed.

"Smile." Ben prompted, squeezing her hand.

She did and waved shyly to a group of kids in blue shirts and tan pants and skirts as the carriage rolled past. They gasped in excitement and began to tug on their mother's skirts as they exclaimed: "She waved at me! The new queen, she just waved!"

"She has purple hair!" A small child screamed, running ahead of them in the crowd while his mother yelled behind him. "Just like they said! I want purple hair too!"

There was a crash and Mal's head snapped up. The driver flicked the reins a little and began to quickly move past a commotion on the left. Mal leaned forward to see what had happened. A large group on Ben's side was yelling far louder and more insistently than anyone else. They had flung a sign underneath the carriage's wheels, where it splintered and broke. More people held large signs and some were shouting so hard some of their faces were turning purple. Mal glimpsed one sign that read: "The villains will destroy us!" Another read: "Go home, demon spawn!"

Ben pulled her back as people shook their fists at the carriage. Mal pushed him away. "Who are they?" She whispered as her eyes skimmed the signs.

Ben grimaced. "Protestors." He grumbled. The carriage rattled on past the end of the group. Mal spotted Auradon guards marching through the crowds, presumably to tell them off. The last sign Mal saw as the group was ushered away had a picture of Maleficent with an angry red 'x' through her face. Mal swallowed. Protestors. Against her. She looked away.

The carriage came to a halt at the base of the Auradon Cathedral. Mal tried to not groan as she looked up the staircase that she'd have to climb. Ben tucked her arm into his elbow. "I'll help you." He promised.

A footman opened the carriage door for her, and then Ben stepped out. He immediately helped her step down and took her arm up again. Mal gathered up as many of her skirts as she could and walked up with Ben, hoping the multitudinous layers and the slow speed would help hide every time her foot missed the next step.

There were cameras everywhere. She could tell many were zooming in on her face as bright lights flashed around them. The downside of not joining Ben for his interview was that everyone was anxious to see what she looked like. Reporters were talking aloud as she walked past. "Slim... short, striking purple hair and piercing green eyes." She heard one mumble as he scribbled. She swallowed.

Near the top, a little princess in red tripped out into the Isle as she lost her balance, crowded among the adults on the stairs. Mal narrowly avoided tripping over her as the girl scrambled to get up. Ben paused as both Mal and the small child regained their footing. Mal let go of him to bend down and help her up. "Are you alright?" She asked.

The poor thing looked like she'd seen a ghost. She nodded numbly. Mal's eyes flickered up and down from the ground to her eyes. She tried to summon that confidence that Ben always seemed to have when talking to people. She cleared her throat and said: "Those are pretty earrings you have."
The girl reached up to feel her earlobes. She was wearing little birds with tiny red glass wings. Mal smiled. "Do you like birds?" She asked.

The child stared for a few seconds, then nodded. Mal reached behind the little girl's hair and brushed her fingers against one of the earrings. The birds wiggled a little, and their mouths began to move. Sweet birdsong emitted from them. The girl's face twisted into shock. Mal smiled, shook her hand, and stood back up. Ben took her arm with a palpable aura of pride, and together they walked towards the doors of the cathedral. There, a waiting footman offered his arm to Mal. Mal glanced nervously at the crowd behind them, leaned up to kiss Ben's cheek, and then took her leave. Ben, meanwhile, would wait outside to walk down the aisle to his destiny.

They led her through a series of back hallways and to the coronation room. They entered from the back. When she entered, the room hushed for a few seconds and then began to buzz. She was led to sit beside the King during the ceremony. Adam smiled and patted her hand when she sat down. "It's okay to breathe." He told her.

The hall was incredible. The cathedral was hundreds of years old and had been partially destroyed during the war twenty-five years ago. King Adam had requested it be renovated before he'd even become King. It was made of speckled grey stone and large glass windows fragmented the light streaming inside.

For several long minutes, there was nothing for Mal to do but fiddle with the skirts of her dress. She tried to sit up tall – it didn't work. She imagined her mom sitting, staring intently at the home screen, shouting for silence.

The trumpets began to pick up a different tune, and the doors opened. Ben was almost so far away she couldn't see him take a deep breath. Almost. King Adam and Queen Belle stood up and the entire hall was silenced. Mal stood up hastily. Someone laughed to her right. Mal bit her cheek and steeled her gaze, but Adam put a hand on her shoulder.

"Ease up." He whispered. "It's his coronation day. You could look a little happier."

"I know." She muttered. "Just… nerves."

King Adam nodded in understanding.

People bowed and curtseyed as he passed. There were smiles. As Ben passed, people looked excitedly to one another. He looked tall, elegant, and kingly. It made her twist her hands and think about herself, climbing the walls of the castle and meeting princesses with dirt on her face. If only Evie's mother had enchanted her instead. That seemed like the kind of thing Evie's mom would do. Then, Evie would be the gorgeous queen who took everyone's breath away and who participated in royal conversation without a hitch.

She stood taller and glanced to the side. She saw several people she recognized, one of which was sadly Audrey. But there was also Doug and Sophia. Beside Sophia stood an erect woman in forest green, with golden eyes and naturally white hair. She smiled at Mal, and something warm unlocked in Mal's chest.

An enchantress. How interesting.

Ben began to ascend the low stairs to the pedestal, paused halfway up, and knelt. Fairy Godmother turned to Adam with a joyous smile. He bowed, and she curtseyed. Then he bent down, and she lifted the crown, which had been resized and no longer fit him, off his head. This she put on Ben's head as Belle lifted the glass jar off of the wand, which stood upright in a cushioned pad in the
center of the raised platform the royal party stood on. Fairy Godmother took it and held it out in both hands as she spoke.

"Do you solemnly swear to protect and guide the peoples of Auradon, for as long as you shall reign?" Fairy Godmother asked. She sounded like she was about to burst with excitement. Ben lifted his head a little, and he and Mal locked eyes. She made a gesture with her head to get on with the show.

After all, she wasn't sacrificing herself to this cause for nothing.

"I so swear," Ben said with resounding fervor.

"Then it is my honor and my joy to bless our new king." The Fairy Godmother said, tapping the wand once on his right shoulder, once on his left, and then gingerly touching the crown on his head. "Long shall he reign!" The crown lit for half a second, and then it was over. A... magic filled the room. Nothing seen, nothing heard, but it was clear everyone felt it. Auradon yielded to her new ruler, and the magics of the crown sealed upon Ben's head. He stood up, looking stunned. Belle and Adam embraced him. Mal felt an ache in her cheeks. She brushed her finger against the corners of her mouth and discovered a smile was imprinted on her mouth.

A hand wrapped around Mal's bicep and began to lead her back through the back. It was Sophia, with tears on her cheeks. Mal's smile dropped. Of course, now it was her turn.

Mal hadn't given the actual marriage much thought since Belle and Sophia had taken over and assured her it'd be great. Now she wished she'd had them define 'great'.

Sophia led her out the way she'd come and took her back around to the front so Mal could walk down the aisle. She slung an arm around the shorter girl's shoulder. "You deserve this, you know?" She said with shining eyes. "The party and the people. You deserve an event like this."

Mal shrugged. She personally didn't think anyone deserved what she was going through.

At the front doors, a man wearing wire-rim reflective glasses stood with his hands behind his back in front of the door. Mal gasped. "Stewart?" She asked.

Stewart turned around and smiled at her. "Miss Mal!" He said and removed his sunglasses. He reached out for her hand and shook it. "Or, is it Queen Mal, now?"


"Good, good." Stewart winked at Sophia, who blushed a little. "I didn't miss it then."

"Well, you missed the coronation, but if you care to, I'm about to walk out," Mal explained.

"Oh, I wasn't here for the coronation," Stewart informed her with a smirk. He held out his arm, much like Ben did sometimes when they went for walks around the castle. Mal stared at him questioningly. Stewart continued to smile as he began to explain: "Ben asked me if I'd escort you down the aisle and give you away. He said I was the one who brought you here to him in the first place and said it felt fitting."

Mal felt something in her heart that initially hurt, but then it became an overwhelmingly warm and bright feeling. Her vision felt blurry. She smiled and threaded her arm through his. He squeezed it to his side and patted her fingers.

"Are we good to go, Sophia?" He asked.
Sophia smiled. The pink tones hadn't left her cheeks yet. She nodded, wiped her tear-filled eyes, and stepped back as two footmen appeared to open the doors.

Mal looked up and met the eyes of many in the crowd. Her legs turned to jelly. They stood for a few seconds as everyone in the room turned to face them.

"Ready?" Stewart whispered.

She nodded, and he led her down the aisle.

The room was a much different view coming into it. Mal hadn't realized exactly how many people there were. She had to stop herself from gaping at all the eyes that were on her. Garlands of blue and white flowers had been hung from the sides of the cathedral, and the stained-glass windows reflected pretty patterns across the walls. Mal could see Ariel, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Merida, and Moana in some of the intricate window impressions.

Stewart kept Mal at a decent pace between rushing because she was so anxious to sit down and have this over with and going too slow because she was still taking in the whole thing.

"Penny for your thoughts, princess?" He muttered, really, really quietly into her ear.

"I'm not a princess," Mal muttered.

"No, you're not." Stewart agreed with a tone of reverence. "You're a queen."

"Not yet." Mal shook her head. Not yet; not now; not ever.

"The crown will be a nice accessory," Stewart whispered in her ear. "I've known since I first saw you that you are a strong, independent leader. You choose to walk with the war-weary and work for the better of all. You, madam, are a queen." She and Stewart leveled their eyes and came to an understanding of each other.

When Ben had walked down, people had bowed and smiled. But as she passed, people only dipped their heads in acceptance, with only the youngest who did not understand why everyone was cautious about the new queen bowing. One man with a bristly beard's head went down, and a glob of spit appeared on the carpet as Mal passed. Mal ignored him.

Ben reached for her hand as she neared him. She and Stewart met eyes one last time, and he took her hand in his rough, calloused one. Then he gave her away to Ben with a smile and stepped back. As it were, Stewart had now brought Mal to Ben twice.

Fairy Godmother married them. She started to cry as she got to the lines 'in sickness and in health, for better or worse, till death do we part.' Mal felt her throat go tight, and that was before she looked at Ben.

He looked proud, kingly, and stern. He smiled as bright as he could every time she met his eyes. She started to blush after the third time when she looked back, and he hadn't stopped looking at her.

"Are you two, uh, exchanging vows?" Fairy Godmother asked with a flashy smile.

Mal started to say no when Ben suddenly let go of her hands and reached into his pocket. She stared at him in horror. He pulled a little piece of palace stationery all folded-up out of his pocket and smiled confidently at her.
"I have a few things. Some of them I spent the last few days thinking of, and others my Mom said I better promise you so that you don't have to worry about it." Ben said. The audience laughed at his quip towards his Mom. "Mal, I promise you safety. You will never have to worry about whether or not you'll be safe with us again. If you are hurt, it will never be by my hand. And I will protect you if you decide you need protecting, though I doubt you'll ever want it. I promise you your place in a partnership. You are a ruler and an innovator both like and unlike me. I recognize your strengths and vow never to stifle you. You will always have a place in the palace as long as I am king. You will always have a say over your homeland and yourself. You will have opportunity to display your talents, and you will always have a place of comfort in me." He smiled shyly at her, and she felt a little smile stretch across her own face. "These things I promise you, Mal, Queen of the Isle and of Auradon."

He folded his paper up and took her hands again. Mal ran her thumb over his knuckles. Before the Fairy Godmother could open her mouth to continue, she began to speak.

"I'm always going to help you about." She told him. "And I'm always going to challenge you. I know I'm not going to stay the same person for you, but I swear there won't be a day I'm not working to be a better friend and confidante. We're never going to be like anyone else, but that's okay. We may come from different worlds, but we're still a team." Mal swallowed. "I'm your shield. I'm your sword. I'm going to protect you and I'm going to fight for you. Above that, I'm going to cherish, honor, and change you through this life…" She trailed off. "And into the next."

Ben started to cry. It must have been the nerves or the stress or something. She chuckled at him as he took one of his hands back to scrub at his eyes. "May God go with you and bless you." He mumbled, which was the beginning of a Celtic wedding vow that Mal knew from when Evie had recited them in her sleep a few years ago. "May you see your children's children."

Mal started speaking with him as if they had planned this. It was practically the only line she really knew:"May you be poor in misfortune and rich in blessings."

And Belle, Adam, Stewart, Sophia, and the Fairy Godmother took up the chant: "May you know nothing but happiness from this day forward."

Gradually, the word spread, until everyone in the hall was repeating the mantra with them. "May joy and peace surround you both, contentment latch your door. Happiness be with you now, and God bless you evermore. May you live with trust, and nurture lifelong affection. May your lifelong dreams come true for you; move ever in that direction."

When it was over, there were only the sounds of general sniffles around the room. Fairy Godmother, Ben, Adam, Sophia, and Belle were all crying openly, which made Mal feel very awkward for not being so emotionally overtaken until she glanced toward Stewart behind her and saw him looking as awkward as she felt.

After long last, Fairy Godmother cleared her throat. "We wish you two the absolute best." She hiccupped. "You may kiss the bride."

Ben put a hand along her jaw and drew her attention back to him. They kissed quickly, and she tasted salt from his tears. Yeah, it was a little weird. They made it as short as possible. Fairy Godmother held out two rings when they finished. As Mal and Ben retreated half a step and put their rings on, a new person got up onto the stand. It was Doug, looking very unsure of himself. He sat down in one of the chairs on the stand, and Fairy Godmother replaced the wand and Ben moved to stand in front of the wand case as the glass was lowered. Then he turned back towards the audience and knelt. Mal got the distinct feeling she should get out of the way. She went to sit in her seat beside Doug, but before she could ask him anything, Adam and the Fairy Godmother put
their hands atop Ben's head.

Oh, of course. They were giving the King a verbal blessing.

Auradon had started a tradition with King Adam where the Fairy Godmother would allow someone else to hold her wand for a short period of time with a spell on it. They'd receive several short, spontaneous visions of the future of the kingdom, and then give the king a verbal blessing before they'd forget it all. Adam and Belle had given each other their blessings when they'd first been crowned. Mal guessed that they'd cast the spell before she'd arrived.

Adam swallowed and looked at Belle. Belle smiled and wiped some tears off her cheeks. Something told Mal this was officially Adam's last act as King; ordaining his son to the post. Adam cleared his throat.

"Benjamin Florian Benson, as former king of Auradon, it was my pleasure to hold the Fairy Godmother's wand to receive prophecy of your future. I have seen many great and marvelous things, which I will henceforth forget. I would like you to know that while you are not, and never have considered yourself, the hero of your own tale, I wish to inform you your name will be blotted down as the greatest king in Auradonian history. I have built the kingdom, but you will cause it to flourish and grow like never before. In fact, there will come a period of time where there will be no suffering upon the face of the land for a time, including in the parts you have abdicated unto your new wife. You and Mal will build up an empire unto your kingdom and unto yourselves. Your home will be a place of refuge, and your family tight-knit. You have no need to fear for the future, not even in times of danger and war. Do your best and all things will work for your favor. My dear boy, it has been a pleasure to watch you grow."

Former King Adam removed his hands from his son's head and helped him to his feet. They embraced, and after a while, turned to Mal. Doug stood up nervously beside her. "They, ahem, asked me to give you your blessing. Hope that's okay with you, and-

"It's fine." Mal interrupted him with a smile. "Shall we?" She stood up.

"Okay." He said. "Let's do this, then." He lent her his arm for the short seven-step walk. Ben and Adam moved out of the way as they approached. Adam went to go sit by Belle, who leaned into his shoulder and began to bawl. Mal felt bad. She and Ben were kind of ruining their reign. But there was happiness in how the king and queen looked at their son. She could only hope that what Adam had said was true, and they'd be able to live up to their predecessors.

Mal carefully knelt down in her vast array of skirts. The Fairy Godmother took the crown from Belle's head and carried it to Mal. They had refinished the crown with silver instead of gold, so it looked immaculate atop her head in the midst of all the striking purple. Doug and the Fairy Godmother put their hands on Mal's head. Doug's hands were much shakier than Fairy Godmother's, Mal noticed. After a few seconds, Doug began to speak:

"Mal Bertha Maleficent, by the power invested in me as an authority in the kingdom of Auradon, I hereby anoint you as Queen of Auradon and recognize your explicit worthiness to rule this kingdom. From thenceforth, you will be known as Her Majesty, Queen Mal of the Isle and of Auradon." Doug said. His hands settled and became less quaky on her head.

"Queen Mal, a normal queen would rule the lands jointly with her husband, but you are not a normal queen. You have agreed to work with and to support the King, but you have relinquished your commanding power over the states of Auradon of your own free will. Your sole kingdom, at this time, is that of The Isle of The Lost, which the king has seen fit to sever from Auradon and give to you, in the hopes you will repair that land.
"Mal, at this time I am entitled to tell you about portions of your life and future." Doug paused. "I have seen it all. It is glorious. I promise that you will be the cause of happiness throughout the kingdom at many points in your life, and you will bring about the unification of the people. You are entering this marriage full of sorrows and fears, but I promise you now that your marriage and your strong relationship with your husband will one day be your greatest achievement. You will be tried and strengthened together. Your fondest memories will be forged with your new family in Auradon."

Doug sniffled. "Fear not about never seeing those you have left behind and whom you miss." He said. "You will have the opportunity to reconnect and rebuild and to forge new paths the likes of which Auradon does not yet understand. You will also have the opportunity to correct many of the grievances caused by your mother, Maleficent, and the heroes of Auradon, as well as villains that you have never heard of and that you have not considered. We eagerly await your wisdom."

When he removed his hands, Mal didn't move. She sat still, trying to process all that he had proclaimed. She only moved when Doug offered her his hand, and when she took it, he helped her to his feet. On newly-found instinct, she turned to find Ben. He stood from where he had sat beside his parents, and she reached for his hand. They stood as one unit together for a moment and then turned to face all of Auradon. No words were said, and all Mal could hear in the wake of the applause were the whispers with her name attached.

It wasn't entirely clear what the reception was celebrating. Originally, it had been planned as the coronation after-party, but then revamped by Belle and Sophia to include Mal. The result was a somewhat awkward climate as guests shuffled past to give congratulations for the two events. Many people avoided Mal out of principle - don't go too close to the daughter of Maleficent.

Mal and Ben split up upon arrival. Many of the guests followed him, meaning that so long as she stayed away, she was left mostly alone. As he shook hands and talked with his parents and people around him, she slipped off her shoes in a quiet corner and fished the crown out of her curls, feeling absolutely miserable. She glanced up to make sure Ben was still where she'd last seen him, and glimpsed Audrey standing with a tall, dark-skinned older woman. Both were watching Mal with looks of contempt frozen on their faces as she removed her earrings and other jewelry and put them in her shoes for safekeeping. The only thing she kept on was the ring, which she'd take off when they got back to the palace later that night.

"Queen Mal." Someone greeted her in a somewhat wary tone. Mal looked up and saw a woman with short black hair with a feminine, yet somewhat prudish dress. She recognized her immediately from all the nights she'd heard the Evil Queen ranting and raving.

"Snow White." Mal nodded, letting her eyes close for more than a few seconds as her head spun. This was an anchorwoman. She was also a famous Auradonian figure. Lovely.

Snow White stuck out her hand. "It's lovely to meet you, finally. You looked very nice today in your dress. Wasn't it Belle's?"

Mal nodded with a forced smile. "Thank you, and yes, it is Belle's. It's nice to meet you as well. I've heard lots about you."

Snow White smiled uneasily. "Oh? I can't imagine what you might have heard."

Mal swallowed. "My best friend on the Isle take a lot of your advice in making and designing clothes. She runs her own little fashion line."
"Really?" Snow White's eyes sparkled. "I'd love to see some of the things she's made."

"I brought things she made for me," Mal recalled, stifling a yawn. "They're at the palace at the moment. I think they were put in my closet, but I haven't had much time to investigate."

"What's her name?" Snow White asked.

Mal winced. "Evie." She said and watched Snow's reaction as the older woman raked her brain for anything the name sounded like.

"Evie... is she the daughter of..." Snow White trailed off with a furrowed brow.

"The Evil Queen." Mal sighed. Snow White's face crumpled in realization.

"Oh!" She exclaimed. "Oh, well, that's very interesting. I hadn't realized that Aunt Grimhilde had... oh." Poor Snow looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Yes." Mal sighed, feeling even more down than before. "Anyways. I'm glad to have met you. I hope you have a nice time here tonight."

"T-thank you." Snow stammered, taking a few steps backward. "It was nice to meet you as well. Congratulations on your-"

"Thanks." Mal interrupted with a sigh. She began to rake her fingers through her hair, messing up her hairspray as Snow White vanished away into the crowd. She scrubbed a little at her eyeliner and picked off a few bits of mascara as she pulled her skirts up to get at the odd little bracelet Belle and Sophia had put underneath her knee.

"I don't think that's for you to take off." A cool voice stopped her. Mal looked up, slightly annoyed at being spoken to again, and was astonished to see the enchantress she'd noticed earlier in the day staring at her. She was still wearing green, though her dress had changed to a long, smooth cocktail dress. She put a chair beside Mal and sat down as Mal released her skirts and let them fall back down to her ankles. The woman gestured to her knee. "It's a garter belt. Very symbolic to Auradon. It's for luck. Ben will take it off of you later in the evening before you toss flowers to the single girls."

Mal frowned. "But it's up by my knee." She protested.

The enchantress leveled her gaze with Mal's. "They know." She told her.

Mal's cheeks suddenly erupted into bright red. "Oh." She said.

"If it's any comfort, it's supposed to be higher. Whoever helped you put it low on purpose. Usually, it goes above the knee or by your thigh." The enchantress explained. "And, usually, the groom takes it off with his teeth."

"With his teeth?" Mal repeated in a high-pitched, scandalized tone. Some nearby guests shot her confused looks as her cheeks flushed scarlet. Horrible images filled her mind.

"Don't worry." The enchantress shook her head. "The idea doesn't appeal to him either."

Mal sighed, pushing her shoes with their contents under her chair and setting her head on her hands. She was still imagining him trying to wrestle it off while guests laughed at them. The idea brought prickling tears to her eyes, but she refused to cry. "They didn't really explain all this to me." She shrugged. "What else do I need to be prepared for? The cavalry and desecration?"
"No." The enchantress disagreed. "You don't need to worry about that at all - ever. Besides, there will come a day very soon a greater army than Auradon's will answer to you." Mal's head shot up and she stared into the woman's deep, illusioned eyes. Her mouth suddenly felt very dry. The enchantress cracked a smile. "There will be a dance." She told Mal. "For you and he. And afterward, the floor will be open to everyone. And you'll have to stand so everyone can get a good look at you when they announce the Royals. They're doing dinner buffet style, so there'll be no toasts, and after dinner, you get to cut cake and throw it at Ben."

Mal's mouth fell open. "No way." She smiled. "That sounds like fun. Can we skip to that part?"

The enchantress laughed. "You have to eat a piece of it first, and so does he, but yes, then there's a cake fight." Mal hung her head back and laughed as she imagined Ben scowling at her. What were the chances she could get away with blowing the cake up in his face, just like the glitter can? As if the woman could read her mind, the enchantress shook her head. "Save some for everyone, though." She cautioned. "And, afterward, they'll have you throw a bouquet of flowers over your head, just like I told you. And Ben will take the garter off your knee and throw that. It's supposed to be good luck to the two that catch them. And normally, people would throw rice or glitter at you as you leave the party, but I have a feeling that Belle and Adam are going to have you sneak away instead. They're getting concerned you're reaching your wit's end, and there's only so much cake you can throw to let your frustration out."

Mal laughed despite the fact her head had started spinning again. So many traditions... so many details. She started rubbing her leg together to edge the itchy garter down onto her calf muscle instead of under her knee, where it itched.

The enchantress reached forward suddenly and pulled Mal's face back to her. Her eyes lit up with naturous magic as she carefully examined Mal's face. Mal shrunk back from her deep gaze as the woman kept a firm hold on her face. "You're still quite young." The enchantress whispered, sounding fascinated.

Mal swallowed. "Don't we all know it." She gasped.

"Quite young." The enchantress repeated in a whisper. "You're not of age on the Isle, or in Auradon, or by Fae law, or even in the Ancient Lands."

"Ancient Lands?" Mal gasped.

"They didn't tell you much, either." The enchantress continued in an increasingly soft whisper. "The palace. Either because you didn't want to hear, or they didn't know, or they didn't know how to tell you, I don't know." She hesitated. "You have such interesting stories." She complimented Mal. "I'm surprised they didn't mention these in your blessing." On her words, dozens of vivid, intense images blinded Mal. She saw swords clanging against each other, and thick black sands, and purple lizard scales, and churning green flames. There was a sound like bones shattering and a sword snapping, and she felt intense heat and palpable exhaustion. Other sensations filled her. She could feel herself draining what felt like(she could be wrong) magic out of her body and she could feel betrayal, sharp and clear. She watched an entire desert melt into a lake of glass and an entire city burn in green flames as black horses ran through the wreckage. She saw the Jolly Roger ship flying again as it had years ago, and saw large buildings stretching towards the sky on the Isle of the Lost. Dark laughter echoed in her ears, pain filled her body, something unbelievably strong and powerful settled on her chest and suddenly it was all over and she was left staring into the enchantress's eyes as she gasped for breath.

"What?" She panted as she caught her breath.
"Nothing, dear." The enchantress released her chin. "I was only wondering whether they'd let you have champagne at your own reception since you're not of age yet."

"That's a no." Someone interrupted the two, appearing out of nowhere. It was Sophia, who handed Mal a tall flute glass filled with sparkling liquid. "Sparkling water." She whispered in Mal's ear. "You let me know if you want any more. You can't have the champagne till you're eighteen."

Mal scowled as she took a sip. It tasted just like water with a hint of something lemony. "I can get married, have my own country, and sword-fight Ben but I can't drink champagne?" She asked.

"Exactly." Sophia gave her a sympathetic look. "Of course, it's not all that. Belle and Adam are especially concerned about how you would... control yourself with alcohol?"

Mal furrowed her brow. "What, do they think I'd start performing magic and screaming at everyone about the Isle of the Lost?" She snorted as she took another sip from her specialized drink. Sophia said nothing, and Mal's heart sank. "Yeah, okay, that makes sense." She grumbled. She looked across the room and saw Ben take a glass from the bar area that had been set up. His glass looked much different from hers. It was smaller with a wide bottom and narrow top, made to fit in his hand, and filled with a honey-colored drink. "What's Ben getting?" She asked Sophia.

"Ben is of drinking age, so he can have whatever he wants," Sophia explained as she pulled up another chair by the Enchantress and Mal. "If I had to guess, I'd say that's a brandy. Ben isn't a huge fan of hard liquor, or drinking in general, but that's usually what he goes for when he does have a glass. I've also seen him and his dad with armagnac and scotch, but he likes the brandy because it doesn't burn your throat going down."

"I didn't realize you were such an expert on alcohol," Mal commented, watching as Ben shook hands with a king in a black suit. "My mother worked in the palace with King Stefan," Sophia said shortly. "You know, Aurora's father? Queen Leah's husband. He used to drink a lot to drive the demons out of his mind." Sophia pointed across the room to where Audrey and the older woman sat together, speaking with very cross looks on their faces. "By the way, I'd avoid them tonight. Queen Leah can be very cruel when she gets going."

"Oh," Mal commented. "Okay." She kept her eyes on Ben, who spared a glance at her, mostly alone in the corner, and then turned to bow to a queen who wanted to speak with him. He took another drink as the woman began speaking.

The enchantress hummed. "Guilt." She decided aloud. "He's done that twice now. I suppose he's trying to keep the edge off the guilt."

"Guilt?" Mal asked.

"Don't worry about it." Sophia patted her shoulder. "He's a strong man. People just haven't been saying the nicest things to him about you."

"About me?" Mal frowned and knit her eyebrows together. Sophia's lower lip wobbled a little.

"Everyone wishes you were a bit older than you are." The enchantress hummed. "Especially Ben. See the way he's refusing to look at you now?"

Sophia frowned at the older woman, but it was too late to stop her. Mal frowned as she noticed how Ben had turned his back towards her and was quickly draining his glass. Trying to fight guilt. "Does he do that often?" Mal asked Sophia. "With the drinks? You must know since you work for
Sophia looked a little frustrated, assumedly with the enchantress, who observed all with a careless expression. "Only lately. And he's not a drunkard." Sophia forced out. "And never will be because he doesn't respect that kind of a lifestyle. It's only been a glass each night since you two went out driving. He's just trying to numb it - the guilt - a bit. His parents have already spoken with him about bad habits though, so don't worry in the slightest." She stood up. "You'll be needed soon. You're supposed to share the first dance with him. And then there'll be a couple of other things - I'll explain them to you as we walk."

"Now?" Mal asked.

"Now," Sophia repeated firmly. She offered Mal her hand and pulled her up. "Where are your shoes?" She asked.

Mal took a little half-step to hide the satin slippers underneath her skirts and shrugged. "I don't know." She lied. "I kicked them off somewhere." She couldn't understand why Sophia was suddenly acting so hostile. She was usually so nice.

Sophia let out an exasperated sigh, though she smiled a little at Mal's antics. "Fine, fine. Anyways, it was nice to speak with you, madam." She curtseyed to the enchantress a little.

The enchantress reached out and took Mal's hand. More vivid images raced past her eyes, though they were much more comforting than the first wave of prophecies. Feelings of power and warmth raced through her. She glimpsed people she'd known on the Isle smiling, saw her friends momentarily, saw a world covered with white as she raced through it, and saw dozens of people she'd never met before. Two, in particular, took her breath away. One was of a dirty child on the Isle of the Lost, a brand-new baby that she was taking into the city. The other was of Belle taking a small child away into another room. It all happened so fast Mal couldn't tell whether the child was the same one, or which villain was their parent. The entire experience left her breathless. The enchantress smiled and patted her hand. "Good luck, Mal of the Isle, of Auradon, Exanton, and the Ancient Lands." She whispered. She released Mal's hand and returned to stare off at the party.

Sophia put both hands on Mal's shoulders and marched her away quickly.

"What'd she say to you?" Sophia whispered as she hurried Mal along the back wall towards where Belle and Adam were speaking together. "I hurried over when I saw her but what did she say?"

"Nothing." Mal lied. "Or, at least, I couldn't make sense of it." She looked back over her shoulder, and to her surprise, the woman had vanished. "Where'd she go?" She gasped.

Sophia glanced over her shoulder, biting her lip. "She's gone. She tends to do that. Her name is Agathe Hattie Morahan. She's the enchantress who cursed Adam and the castle forty years ago. By god, that woman scares me."

"Scare you?" Mal asked, confused.

"Of course!" Sophia turned back around with wide eyes. "She turned everyone in the palace into live collectibles! I work in that same palace with some of the people from that story!" Sophia shivered. "She gives me the creeps. But she didn't say anything to you? About curses or the likes?"

"N-no." Mal stuttered, remembering the images of swords and what had appeared to be a very real, very intense war. "She was actually very nice. And if you're all so afraid of her, why did you invite her here?"
Sophia let out a dry laugh. "You really think that Belle and Adam wouldn't invite the enchantress who already cursed them once to a very important royal function that involves Maleficent's daughter? Maleficent, as in the evil fairy who cursed Stephan and Leah's kingdom for not inviting her to a very important royal function? If there's one thing Auradon does very well, it's that we learn from our mistakes. That woman has already done us over once, we don't want to cross her again." Sophia ran a hand through her hair and tried to calm down. "But she really didn't say anything to you?"

"She explained some wedding traditions to me." Mal started slowly. "And she showed me things - people on the Isle and buildings being built there."

"Good things?" Sophia asked, shifting her weight and twisting her hands.

"Yes," Mal confirmed after a hesitation. Sophia relaxed immediately and took a steadying breath.

"She's a prophetess," Sophia explained. "She can see the future in degrees, similar to when Fairy Godmother gives her wand for prophecies. I'm glad it was all good things because that means good things are coming." She began to walk Mal towards Belle and Adam.

"But... it wasn't all good things." Mal furrowed her brow. "There was fire and swords and war."

Sophia stopped and stared at Mal with a worried, heartbroken expression falling over her face. "Then..." She trailed off. "I hope it doesn't happen anytime soon." A horrible feeling wrenched Mal's gut as she stared at Sophia. Sophia's expression changed as she thought, and she looked up to Mal in confusion. "What did she say to you about the ancient lands? And, that other place, I can't remember...?"

"Exanton," Mal answered easily, surprised she'd remembered. "I don't know. I've never heard of them before."

"The Ancient Lands is a term the old Fae folk use to refer to the Moorlands," Sophia informed her. "Maleficent and the Fairy Godmother call it the Moorlands, so you wouldn't know the term. But no one except Sleeping Beauty has been able to cross over since the death of Stephan. The lands are sealed off and the barrier to Auradon ends where their magical protection barrier starts. It's on the far west side of Auradon." Sophia pointed to a wall, and Mal took her word that it was west.

Mal shrugged and swallowed. "I don't know." She answered honestly. "I couldn't really understand a lot of what she said to me."

A hand landed on Mal's shoulder and turned her around a bit. It was Ben, who had lost his glass at some point. "Hi." He whispered. "You and I are supposed to share a dance. Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Mal repeated, looking back at Sophia, who had closed off a bit as she tried to calm down. "I, um, don't dance."

"I'll lead you," Ben whispered, taking her hand. Sophia backed a step away. "It'll be okay." He whispered.

Everything was happening so fast, Mal wasn't sure what to do. Sophia took the glass from Mal's hand and vanished. Somewhere, whoever was controlling the music announced that the couple's first dance was happening. Her mouth felt dry as Ben led her to the middle of the floor, where everyone left a wide-open space for them. Quickly, Ben helped show her where her hands went, and they began to softly spin.

"Are you okay?" Ben whispered in her ear.
Mal swallowed. She saw a flash of green out of the corner of her eye and tripped a little before she regained her footing. She stepped on Ben's toes as she tried to figure out what her feet were supposed to do. "I had a meeting with your family enchantress." She whispered back.

Ben went a bit stiff. "What'd she say?" He asked.

"Lots," Mal whispered. "What's so important about the Moorlands?"

Ben let go of Mal's hands and took her waist instead. She put her arms around his neck as they continued spinning in circles. "I'll tell you later." He murmured. "Anything else?"

"You guys didn't tell me about the garter tradition." Mal reprimanded softly with a stern look.

Ben winced, and then hastily schooled his expression. "I'll talk to you about that later too." He assured her. "But don't worry about anything." He took her hand from behind his head and spun her out before bringing her back in. Mal fumbled her feet. It was turning out to be a good thing her dress was a bit long - no one could tell she was fudging her footwork.

They did a few spins, took a turn or two, and the song ended. Immediately, people flooded the floor and began to dance. Mal took Ben's arm and the two walked off the floor towards where Belle was waiting. Ben released her as Belle stepped forward to take Mal's hand. "I'm getting another drink." Ben murmured softly. Mal could tell he was resisting the urge to mess up his hair. Her skin felt cold.

"How many is that?" Belle frowned, patting Mal's cheeks.

"I've only had two snifters." Ben sighed. "Three isn't enough to do me in, mom."

"Brandy?" Mal asked softly, testing Sophia's theory.

An irate, yet amused look passed over his face. "Did Sophia tell you that?" He asked, holding up a finger like he was about to deliver a thesis. "Because it's not a brandy; it's a cognac, and I will fight her on that term any day other than today."

Mal snorted, which only drove him onwards. "Just because it's called a brandy literally everywhere else doesn't mean it's correct. She's German, I'm French, and Cognac is French. I don't even know what the heck a Brandy is."


"Not too many." Belle reprimanded with a hard look. She examined Mal's pale face. "You smudged your makeup." She sighed. "Where are all your things? And your shoes? Do you need something to drink?"

"I-I just need to sit down," Mal mumbled. The smile dropped off of her face. Ben examined her and turned away. She caught the red tones rising into his neck and saw the way he instinctively ducked his head. He headed towards the bar area, and the bartender pulled a bottle out as he approached.

"It's not too much longer, and we'll head back to the palace." Belle murmured. "We're going to sneak you guys out so we don't have to clean glitter or rice or anything off you two in the car unless you want things thrown at you?"

Mal winced. "Hard pass." She murmured as she took a chair and sat down.
"We're going to bring out the cake soon," Belle whispered as she crouched down at Mal's side. "Do you know of that tradition?"

Mal waved a general hand in the direction of her shoes. "Your enchantress explained it all to me." She whispered. She rubbed her forehead. "I'm fine. Just... give me a moment to myself, please."

Belle stood up, looking worried, and left Mal to her thoughts. Mal looked around the room. Audrey and Queen Leah were still sending her vindictive looks, and Ben was rubbing his forehead, looking equally miserable as he sipped his drink slowly, keeping close to the bar. In a far corner, she spotted Sophia and Stewart talking to each other. A light blush dusted her cheeks. She was holding Mal's refilled glass but didn't seem to be moving anywhere anytime soon. Mal sighed and buried her face from the lights.

The night dragged on slowly. Try though the palace might have to make the cake fight seem interesting, it ended up being pretty painstakingly dull in comparison to the glitter and the dust incidents. It was pretty interesting to smear frosting down Ben's cheek before placing an icing rose on his nose, but the two didn't exactly try very hard to get to other dirty. Ben did lick a bit of frosting off of Mal's cheek in a moment of silliness in front of the crowd, but that was one of the most interesting things that ended up happening. His breath smelled like alcohol.

Near the end, they pulled out a chair and sat it in the center of the room before Ben took her hand and guided her to it. By this time, he was definitely going numb to the world around him, which was probably a good thing. Mal wished that Belle and Sophia would let her join him at the bar, because she'd give anything to not be able to remember this night. The room stilled. Mal sat down with her cheeks burning, refusing to look at anyone as Ben got to his knees, still holding her hand. "Which leg?" He whispered, meeting her eyes for a brief second.

Mal swallowed. "The right one." She informed him, crossing her legs so that the leg in question was on top. "It's just on my calf." She focused on some leftover white icing on his hairline as he listened.

Ben nodded and let go of her hand. His hands were shaking. He picked up her foot and his fingers began trailing up her leg, carefully searching for the garter. Mal took her skirts and tried to lift them a little, but it didn't do much good. He still had to battle the layers of fabric aside. Nevertheless, Ben quickly found the odd scrunchie-bracelet and pulled it down, off her leg and bypassing her bare foot. Mal couldn't stand it anymore. She covered her face as a horrible blush burned her eyes, and the entire room gave a chuckle as Ben quickly stood up and helped her up. He gave a nervous laugh as Mal took several deep breaths, trying to get the blush to fade. "Okay?" He whispered, setting a hand on her waist to steady her.

"I'm okay, I'm okay." She breathed. Sophia walked towards them with a large bouquet that contained begonias, striped carnations, marigolds, monkshood and foxglove. She wondered if there were any unique meanings attached to the flowers. "So, I just throw these over my head?" Mal asked as she took the large bouquet from Sophia.

Sophia nodded. "We invite all the single women to come up first, so wait just a second." She turned around and began to address the crowd. Mal shared a nervous glance with Ben, who was still holding her garter as he waited for his turn.

When the girls had all gathered in a group, Sophia turned Mal around so she couldn't see who she was throwing to. Then, with a gentle breath and a simple count-back from three, she launched it over her head. There was a shout and a scramble and one wail of despair before she turned around to see – Audrey had caught it.
Ben made a little sound of exasperation as Audrey carefully cradled the bouquet in her arms, looking absolutely stunned. Audrey looked up at Mal, and then her eyes flickered over to Ben.

"Well, that's certainly insulting." Ben murmured.

"What?" Mal asked.

"Superstition." Ben groaned. "The girl who catches the bride's bouquet is the next to be married. And Audrey caught it. Oh dear." He rubbed his forehead.

Audrey looked down at the bouquet with a bright smile and carefully rearranged a few stems. Mal snorted and began to laugh as Ben looked scandalized. She patted Ben on the shoulder and switched spots with him as the single boys began to replace the single girls. A few more minutes, she told herself. A few more minutes and it would be over.

Ben threw the garter over his head. Mal watched the garter fly through the air almost carelessly. Someone jumped up to grab it and missed. The garter fell to the floor. No one had caught it.

"Recall!" Sophia yelled. Ben rolled his eyes as someone brought it back to him. Mal wondered what the superstition meant if no one caught it. Luckily, they didn't have to throw it again because someone caught it the second time around, but Mal still wasn't sure what it meant if the superstition went both ways.

Ben heaved a sigh of relief as the crowd went wild. He turned and held out a hand for Mal to take a hold of as the men congratulated the receiver with lots of slaps on the back and funny comments. Ben looked off-balance for a second, but he quickly regained his posture. Mal laughed at him as he pulled her a little closer to him and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. All of the guests clapped politely as they settled down. King Adam stood up and began tapping a spoon against a glass. Ben took Mal's hand and led her off the floor and towards the back of the building as Adam began to thank everyone for coming. Sophia and Belle joined them as they slipped out the back. Stewart was waiting for them beside one of the royal limos, which he opened with a smile and a flourish as they approached.

"Oh!" Mal exclaimed suddenly with a frown. "I forgot my shoes."

Sophia pinched her lips together and pulled the satin slippers out from inside the car. "Yeah, I found where you 'kicked them off' to." She rolled her eyes with a good-natured smile and handed Mal back her crown, which she didn't particularly want, but whatever. "Let's head out before you're mobbed." She suggested.

"What about Adam?" Mal asked.

"Dad's staying behind to sort out everything and say goodbye for us." Ben explained as he helped his mom into the car. Stewart opened the passenger side door to the front seat for Sophia to climb into and watched as Ben held out his hand for Mal. She hesitated, and then took his hand.

"Okay." She whispered. "I guess that's all then."

Ben nodded. "That's all." He agreed. He helped her climb inside, still maneuvering her dress, and Stewart closed the door behind all of them. Soon, the car began to move. Mal thought, for a second, that she saw a woman in a forest-green dress watching them leave outside, but she blinked and there was nothing but people walking outside as the car drove away.

(For those of you who are worried, there'll be no descriptions of adult content in this story, and especially not at this stage in their relationship. Be sure to catch the Easter Eggs in Mal's
bouquet(And Audrey Catching It!), her conversations with the Enchantress and the coronation blessings, because that is as straightforward as the foreshadowing gets.)

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Descendants, Beauty and the Beast (1998 or 2017), Frozen, Cinderella (1950 or 2015), The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Brave, and Moana. (If you guys think that's a lot of things to mention just wait until the war chapters.)
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Ben and Mal opening up to each other about how hard their situation is. There will be no physical drive between them. They travel away for their Honeymoon, and Mal becomes Queen of a Distant Land that needs her. Major foreshadowing in who Ben is grateful he didn't marry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Back at the palace, later that night, Sophia helped Mal out of her wedding dress and then slipped out so Mal could get dressed and also because Stewart had slipped her his phone number and they were going to go and get a late-night ice cream together. She took the dress and Ben's suit with her to be cleaned. Mal was a bit jealous that Sophia had a life outside the palace that she could leave to every day.

Mal fumbled to plug her phone in on the bedside table and rubbed at her scalp. Her hair felt a little wonky for some reason. With her phone still connected to the wall, she scrolled through Auradon News. The media station was picking apart hers and Ben's coronation blessings, although hers was admittedly more covered. As she skimmed the brief excerpts, she dwelt briefly on the Enchantress's words from that day. "You have such interesting stories." She'd said. Mal felt a lump well up in her throat. Stories of war. Stories of magic. The thought of what might lie ahead made her hands shake.

Other stories featured click-bait headlines such as: "What magic was performed at the coronation", "Queen Mal, Daughter of Maleficent; her evil secret", and "A Villainesses' daughter is Queen – What Next?" Mal briefly examined the opening paragraph of one, found it utterly dry and devoid of thought, and closed the tab.

There was a thud in the next room over. Mal glanced towards the doors, then went to the Palace's website. She liked the palace's website a lot. There was a general BIG NEWS section which was currently filled with things pertaining to the days' events and updated according to what people were interested in reading, and there was a little series of tiny blogs – one for each royal member. Adam's included a lot of political statements, Belle's was filled with her reading list, and Ben chose to fill his with many, many short essays about Auradon and its greatness mixed in with inspirational quotes. Mal wasn't sure what she was going to put on hers.

Another crash from the joined sitting-working area of the royal suite. Mal opened the camera and took a photo of herself with her purple hair splayed out on the pillow beside her. This she uploaded onto her little blog-area with the short caption: "I hear crashes from the next room. Half of me thinks I should go make sure Ben isn't going to break himself, but the other half is really, really sleepy."

She craned her head to see if she could spot him without actually moving. She couldn't. When she looked down, Abigail Arendelle had commented: "I like your hair."

"Thank you very much." She replied.
"Where you do get it done?" Abigail asked.

"I just cut it myself," Mal explained.

"And the purple?" Abigail questioned.

Mal contemplated an answer. "It's always grown in like that. Dunno why, since Mom had brown hair."

"Still, cool," Abigail said.

"Yup." Mal agreed.

Another thud came from next door. Mal finally threw her phone down and got up. The living room was a bit larger than the bedroom and had a lower level set into the floor where a couch with a table and some armchairs laid. Other tables and chairs lined the room, along with a large desk that was supposedly for when they brought work back to the room. A television was set in view of the couch, and this was where Ben was crouched down. He was connecting a black box to the television. Mal walked over and put a hand on the dark brown couch, picking at the leather a little bit.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

Ben looked up with a little smile. "I find it abominable that you've been here for three months and still haven't seen any of the movies I grew up with, so voila! Old hero movies from Auradon's glory days!" He spread his hands proudly. Mal scoffed lightly. "You want me to watch the people I grew up around get destroyed on repeat?" She asked.

"No… I want you to see the cool animation and hear all the awesome songs we wrote." Ben whined with a small pout. "And yeah, I know that you're not into all of the stories, but I think you'll really like some of them, so please?"

He nudged a cardboard box with his foot. Mal smiled and walked around the couch. She sat down and pulled the box up onto her lap. "Hercules?" She asked, skimming the box on top of the pile.

"And that's the gospel truth!" Ben sang quietly under his breath as he went back to matching colored cables. Mal snorted. She was glad to see he was coming back to his normal, goofy self. Apparently, his drinking didn't take that away from him.

After a few minutes of shuffling, she asked: "Why are there two Cinderellas and two Beauty and the Beasts?"

"Remakes. We'll probably watch both of them eventually. Me personally, Beauty and the Beast is my favorite story." He turned around to see if she'd get it. Mal only rolled her eyes.

"Oh really?" She laughed. "Want to know my favorite?"

"Maleficent?" He guessed.

She frowned. "Don't you mean Sleeping Beauty?"

"No, there was a movie made about your mom a while back. We'll have to watch it. I dunno if it's in there." Ben frowned, leaning forward to shuffle through the disk holders for a few seconds
before shaking his head.

"Oh." Mal furrowed her brow. "Well, I was going to say the one where the blue prince is forced to hook up with the purple chick, but I don't see that one in here either."

Ben laughed. Mal smirked to the side as she continued shuffling through the plastic boxes.

Mal picked out Bambi, which she would later regret, and the Beauty and the Beast remake for Ben to choose from. "So." She said, drumming her fingers on her knees as she handed the slim boxes to Ben. "We should probably talk about this a little: are we just spending our wedding night watching movies?"

Ben shifted uncomfortably and rubbed his head as if he had gotten a sudden headache. "Yeah. I thought that was a good idea. If you don't, we can…" He trailed off, sounding a bit stifled.

Upon grasping his meaning, Mal closed her eyes and let out a small breath of relief. "Honestly, I like this idea," She agreed. "We'll get together another night."

Ben relaxed as if someone had removed an entire heavy load from his shoulders. He shrugged and leaned back. "I've just been thinking, I mean, you're still pretty young. And we don't want you to get pregnant or anything." He snorted at her as Mal stiffened, looking distinctly uncomfortable, and continued. "Also, I just don't think we're there yet. I know I'm definitely not."

"I'm definitely not either." Mal agreed, taking a breath to quell her shaking. She twiddled her thumbs, trying not to show how much his comments scared her. While it was a relief to know they weren't going to rush themselves tonight, she still had questions. She cleared her throat. "Will it be okay? With like, the crown blessings and everything? Does it matter?"

Ben shook his head as he messed up his hair slowly. "It doesn't." He confirmed. "I looked into it and everything already. Technically a royal marriage is a magical event and it won't be complete until we make it so, but since we're married politically your mother's curse is still fulfilled. Does that make sense?" He looked up with a questioning gaze.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. Her next question had actually been on her mother's curse. She cleared her throat and carefully set a hand on his shoulder. "Are you... okay?" She asked hesitantly.

Ben wouldn't meet her eyes as he continued coming through his hair with his fingers, making it stick up at odd angles. "I'm glad it's over." He whispered. "That was... an ordeal."

"It was." Mal agreed. Her mouth felt a bit dry. Should she tell him about the Enchantress? There were still other things she wanted to ask him. What was Exanton? What was up with the Moorlands?

She opened her mouth to speak, but Ben started talking. "I don't want you to be worried at all about me," Ben told her. "I know I had a couple of drinks in front of you tonight, and I don't know if you're uneasy about that or-"

"I'm not." Mal interrupted. She furrowed her brow. Alcohol was an Auradon concept since it was dangerous to not be on edge when you lived on the Isle, but that didn't mean she didn't understand it. Something to numb pain. Something to distract. "I know you have a good head and heart. I don't mind. Sophia said to me, also, that people were being a bit down on you."

Ben winced. "I'm sorry." He told her. "I shouldn't have listened to them. I know you expect better of me."
Mal gave him a weird look. "What?" She asked. "Of course I don't expect that. But I'm curious-" she sat down beside him, pulling her feet up and hugging her legs to her chest. "What do the people think of me?"

A dark look overtook Ben's face as he shuffled the disk sleeves back and forth in his hands. "You don't want to know." He sighed. "People aren't exactly transparent."

Mal shifted her weight and hesitated a moment. "They don't think I'll be a good queen."

Ben snorted. "That's the least of it." He scoffed. "People think you're spelling me, spelling my parents, orchestrating this. They're talking about what they'll do to you if you start trying to make changes. I've heard threats and subtle comments..." Ben shook his head as he trailed off. "Some people are just angry you're still sixteen. I've seen lots of back-handed things on Auradon's inter-web, people keep saying snide things to me about how I'm robbing you of your childhood and..." again, he trailed off, looking absolutely disgusted.

"I'm sorry," Mal whispered. "They don't say much to me at all. I hadn't heard."

Ben shook his head. "Good." He declared. "Because there are cruel, heartless people in Auradon, and I don't want them to attack you and my mom like they're attacking my dad and me."

"Your dad?" Mal frowned. "Why are they attacking your dad?"

"He's king." Ben declared half-heartedly. "And it's his decision to pass his own throne to me. They're attacking him for stepping down."

Mal's frown deepened. "Do they expect him to rule forever?" She asked.

Ben threw his hands into the air. "Apparently." He sighed. "They'd have been angry if he'd decided to keep it and would have called it corruption, but he can't put it down without a fight either." He shook his head.

"That's awful." Mal sighed. "Auradon is cruel."

Silence reigned over the two. Ben swallowed thickly. "Yeah." He agreed. "I guess we kind of are. You've been saying it, but... yeah. Even my friends - even Audrey - we're cruel." He mirrored Mal, pulling his knees up to his chest and staring off into the distance.

Mal raised an eyebrow at him. "Audrey spoke to you?" She whispered.

Ben immediately flinched, and Mal knew it was so. Carefully, she set a hand on his shoulder. "She's smallminded." She whispered. "Audrey just...cannot understand. She's never, ever known before."

Ben closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "She said the nastiest things about you. Asked if I needed counseling, told me to go dunk myself in the enchanted lake to make sure I wasn't being spelled, acted as if it entirely your fault." He shook his head. "She told me she loved me." He finished.

Mal swallowed. She knew Audrey annoyed Ben, that she did things that confused him and that he didn't agree with. But they had lasted as a couple, if only for a little while.

"Do you love Audrey?" She asked. The word 'love' felt cold on her tongue.

Ben immediately shook his head. "I've never loved anyone." He admitted. "Or, rather, I've never
been in love. I care about Audrey, but even after all that time dating I still don't love her."

"Hmm." Mal hummed. She patted his shoulder and then gestured to the forgotten videos in his hands. "Which one?" she asked.

Ben looked down and examined both films. He sucked in a breath. "Bambi." He murmured quietly, with a sad look in his eyes.

"What?" Mal asked.

Ben jutted his lip out and looked up with a forlorn expression. "Bambi." He repeated sadly.

Mal picked up the disk. "Okay, this one first then." She decided, feeling around the edges for an opening.

Ben nodded and sat down beside her. "We should watch Meet the Robinsons later. That one is gold. Or Big Hero Six. " He let out a little sigh, the kind when someone thought about something they loved. Mal rolled her eyes.

"Bambi," Mal said as she opened the case and pulled out the shiny rainbow-disk. "What makes this work?" She asked softly, confused.

Ben laughed. "Okay, this is a spinny-disk, and it goes in the light-box there." He pointed. Mal glared and palmed him the disk. He exploded into giggles as he got up and put the DVD into the player.

"This movie breaks your heart." He warned.

Mal smiled. "Bring it on." Ben rolled his eyes. An explosion of sound from the speaker made him jump in surprise. His cheeks were bright red as he scrambled for the sound and then took a seat beside Mal on the couch as she laughed at him. Mal laughed and pulled a blanket from a wicker chest beside the couch to throw over her legs. She passed a second one to Ben and then settled in, completely forgetting what she'd wanted to ask him about.

Mal staggered into the room with a small pillow still clutched in her arms. Belle smiled at her and asked: "Are you excited to leave on your honeymoon today?"

Mal deadpanned, trying to remember if she was supposed to know what that word meant, and shrugged. She made an exhausted pair of finger guns around her pillow and replied: "As long as there's sleep," before she collapsed into her breakfast chair. "I don't even know anything about this… so?"

"You sound like you were up really late…" Belle murmured, exchanging a look with Adam.

Mal's eyes grew big and sad as she jutted out her lower lip. "Bambi." She whispered softly in explanation.

"What?" Adam asked with a raised eyebrow. He looked uncomfortable.

"We watched Bambi," Ben supplied, wandering into the room looking equally exhausted. "And Beauty and the Beast, and Meet the Robinsons, and the Aristocats, and the first twenty minutes of Snow White." He pulled out his chair and began pawing around on the table for some milk as Mal poured herself a glass of orange juice with a yawn. Belle let out a little breath and an "Oh." She sounded a bit relieved.
Adam's mouth pressed into a straight line as he suppressed a smile. "Only the first twenty minutes?" he asked.

"Dad." Ben began with a sigh followed by a yawn. "Just because she's the nicest lady on the planet doesn't mean her story doesn't suck. And her husband is creepy. Sorry."

"Nicest lady?" Mal yawned. "She practically ran the other direction when I told her the Evil Queen had a daughter yesterday." She reached for an orange. "It gave me a little more respect for EQ. I mean, I knew all about the poison apples, but not the whole 'kill my step-daughter' thing. The lady's a bit scarier than I thought she was."

Belle shivered in agreement. "What did you think about the other movies?" She asked out of pure curiosity.

Mal shrugged. "Your voice sounded fake in the Beauty and the Beast remake, and I didn't really get the ending of Meet the Robinsons. Wouldn't evaporating Doris cause a paradox? Like, if he didn't invent her then the time machine wouldn't have been stolen in the first place, so the entire movie never actually happened." She rolled her eyes and felt around the table cloth for her spoon as Belle and Adam exchanged looks.

"You guys better get moving," Adam said, looking at his watch. "You have the take the back way out. There's a, ah, calamity?" He glanced at Belle, his literate half, (who had a book open under the table) as she ate and waited until she nodded her approval. "at the front gates." At his words, silence graced the table.

Mal paused, stood up, and walked to the north-facing windows of the room. Ben looked like he was trying to solve a brain teaser as Belle stood up. "Um, Mal, you don't need to-" She began worriedly.

"They're protesting me," Mal announced. Ben stood up and went to look out the window beside her with a frown. Mal stared over to the circle drive, where a large group of about fifty citizens was standing. Ten or eleven held signs visible to them. They were dressed in Auradonian Blues and Golds, and the signs were purple. Mal swallowed and turned away. Their shouts were silenced by distance and walls, but Mal still felt their indignation through the glass.

"Yes, we'll leave soon. Where are we going?" She asked.

"Honeymoon," Ben responded quietly, glaring out the window.

Mal raised her eyebrows. "Is that some sort of weird pet name?" She asked.

"No, it's a trip a couple goes on after they get married," Ben responded. His expression didn't change at all.

"Oh, okay." Mal nodded. "I agree we could use that. Where are we going?"

"Surprise," Ben replied with a smile.

"Surprise? I didn't sign up for a surprise." Mal glared. "Just tell me."

"Nope," Ben said. He turned and sat back down to finish his breakfast. "Finish your breakfast and we'll head out." He pulled her chair out so it was easier for her to sit down and stole her pillow as he took his chair. Mal scowled and walked back over as he leaned into it, pushing his plate back a few inches.
Belle and Adam exchanged looks as they all settled back in. Adam cleared his throat as Belle reopened her book and dipped her head down to continue reading. The back of her neck was red. "Ben." Adam began. "You and I need to have a word before you leave."

Ben looked up, looking a bit like a deer caught in headlights. He blinked several times. "About what?" He asked. Mal hesitated, hovering behind her chair as she watched the scene. Adam's face contorted like he was in pain as he struggled for words.

"About me?" She prodded him. Ben looked down, processing, and then glanced back at her.

"Dad?" He asked slowly.

"Yes," Adam admitted, gearing up a little as he felt everyone's gazes bearing down on him. He straightened up in defense. "Yes," he repeated. "Your mom and I want to make clarifications on how we expect you to conduct yourself around Mal."

"Dad." Ben stared at his father, dumbfounded. "Believe me, we got this covered."

"She cannot, under any circumstance, get pregnant." Adam continued, though he was starting to sound strained. Mal's cheeks erupted into flames and she quickly looked away. "Now, whatever happened last night was between you two in your marriage but if we're to break this curse in the end only to split up-"

"Dad!" Ben interrupted. "I am not going to... assault a sixteen-year-old!"

"That's enough." Belle interrupted, closing her book. "Your father and I want Mal and you to respect each other and if she gets pregnant you need to know that your family will split when you part your separate ways." She fixed her gaze, first on Mal, and then on Ben. "That is all." She declared and reopened the pages in her lap.

Mal felt her cheeks burning. Ben looked offended and uncomfortable, and she couldn't blame him. Breakfast was finished in silence, and then Ben escorted Mal back upstairs.

Ben helped Lumiere and one other servant whose name Mal did not know pull their luggage down to the curb where a long-distance carriage was waiting. Whenever Mal caught Ben's eyes, she would raise an eyebrow. He refused to disclose a single word though. She kept with her a small bag that included an aged book of magick from the library, a small stack of paper and a collection of pens and scissors, and a new tablet that Adam had gifted her that included a purple case and a lavender stylus. Ben had packed much heavier than Mal. He and Lumiere each pulled a large, heavy suitcase along behind them. The last servant pulled Mal's suitcase, which was half the size of one of Ben's. Originally, she was going to do it herself, but then she'd left for the restroom and come back to find they'd called another person for the express purpose of taking it down to the carriage. After that, she'd felt too guilty for taking away their only thing to do.

Belle and Adam, who were going to see them off and run the kingdom for the next month before Ben and she returned and began to instigate changes, followed them down for the sole purpose of one hug and a kiss each. Why couldn't they do that up in the palace? No idea.

Ben kissed his mom's cheek and stood by the door to help Mal up. They were both wearing casual clothes, though Ben didn't lose his princely posture. He had tan jeans and black and white shoes. He also had a blue button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up. So, okay, not entirely casual, but it was still a step down from suits and ties all the time. Mal herself had a purple, short-sleeved shirt with a high neckline. She had black shorts and purple tennis shoes. She'd considered going without
sleeves but wasn't entirely sure how Ben would react to the mark of Maleficent on her shoulder.

She hugged Belle. Sophia had said goodbye this morning. She'd come back from hanging out with Stewart last night with a smile on her face. When Mal had asked, Sophia had explained in brief terms the concept of "good friends who are interested in each other but aren't dating yet." Mal wondered if that was where she and Ben would be, in a different world.

Mal held out a hand to shake for the king and was pleasantly surprised when he put his arms around her for a bear/beast hug. "Have fun." He told them. "We'll see you in one month."

Ben held out a hand to help her up as she neared the carriage. She smiled at him. As soon as they were seated in the carriage, they started to move. Mal looked out the window. There was no driver.

Ben put a hand over hers. "It's enchanted." He explained. "We don't use it all that often, but it is available for long-distance trips."

"Long distance?" Mal asked with a frown, mentally irritated over the idea of enchanted carriages still existing in anti-magic Auradon. "Where are we going?"

"I told you." Ben rolled his eyes. "It's a surprise." He reached under the seat and pulled his laptop out of his bag. Mal raised an eyebrow.

"Work?" She asked. "I thought your parents were handling everything."

"Not work." He replied. He pulled out a long, thin, velcro bound book and handed it to her. She opened it up and found CDs. "Movies," Ben explained. "Pick one."

"Is my mom's story in here?" Mal asked as she slipped a few disks out of their covers to examine them.

"Not yet. I put an order in for it and the DVD will be back at the palace when we get back. I do need to teach you how to stream movies, though." Ben contemplated, stowing his bag back underneath them.

Mal didn't recognize a few of the terms he was using, so she kept her mouth shut and picked a disk at random. Ben put the disk into the computer and then started it. Then, he leaned over and put his arm around Mal's shoulder. He was so warm that she immediately curled her head into his shoulder and let her eyes grow heavy.

"Are you going to go to sleep?" Ben teased her before letting out a yawn of his own. He rubbed his thumb on her shoulder.

"You act so differently when no one else is around," Mal told him. "Like, at the party and with your parents, you're a diplomat. You talk more when it's just us."

Ben considered her words as the ads began to play. "No one else knows what being stuck like this is like." He admitted softly.

"You treat me different too," Mal told him. "Have you noticed? Like when we're alone in your car versus when we're with your parents?"

Ben frowned and straightened up. "I'm sorry; are you uncomfortable?"

"No," Mal reassured him. "But... why?"
Ben raised an eyebrow. "Why?" He asked in a comic tone. "Are you serious? You're a girl, extremely pretty and smart, and we're stuck in a situation where you've just become my queen and you're asking why I treat you like I do?"

Mal blinked. She turned to meet his gaze. "You... like me?" She asked.

"Of course I like you. I like everyone." Ben rolled his eyes.

"We've been kissing for a month but... are you in love with me?" Mal asked. That thought took her breath away. She wasn't sure how to react to someone being in love with her.

"I don't know." Ben suddenly looked uncomfortable as well. "I told you. I've never been in love before."

"In Auradon." Mal chuckled. "The land of true love," Ben said nothing. He ran his hand down her arm and found her hand, twisting their fingers together. Mal put her head back into his neck. This felt like something they would do if they were normal. If they had actually chosen to date each other and get to know each other instead of shot-gunning this based on a spell. It felt like something she'd do with her boyfriend or whatever Stewart was to Sophia. She felt her eyelids growing increasingly heavy. "I'm not, like, a problem though, am I?" She whispered.

"I told you; I like you," Ben assured her. "You're kind, you're brave, you look for the best in this awful situation and you don't get mad when we mess up. Like we did yesterday, forgetting to tell you everything."

"That wasn't a problem." Mal yawned. The ads ended and Ben leaned a bit to start the video, but Mal was fading fast. Before they even got around to introducing the hero of the story, she fell fast asleep.

She woke when Ben's fingers started rubbing little circles into her scalp. As far as she could tell, she'd slept through the day. Late afternoon sunlight was filtering through the window. It smelled like fruit and fields outside. She was leaning against Ben's ribcage, and both his arms were around her. She wiggled to loosen his grip and sat up with bleary eyes.

"What time is it?" She wondered as she yawned and stretched.

Ben was awake, though dazed. He'd evidently fallen asleep too. His eyes flickered back and forth from Mal to the view outside. "Almost six o'clock." He told her and rubbed his eyes.

Mal frowned. She had slept all day, and the carriage was still moving. "We're still not there?" She asked. She scooted away from his grasp and leaned out the window.

A summer breeze woke her up. She examined the view. They were moving through plowed fields. The leaves outside were pretty reds and oranges. The sun was nearing the horizon, but it was still warm for now. Small, isolated houses dotted the area. Behind them, the large silhouette of a city with a castle stretched towards the sky. Ahead of them by a little more than two miles was a long line of trees where the field ended abruptly and gave way to forest. Mal studied the site. Something about it filled her with wonder.

"The field stops soon." She told Ben.

"Yeah." He agreed. "Maybe ten minutes more, then." He seemed a little nervous.

"Since we're so close, are you going to spill any secrets?" Mal asked.
Ben shook his head. "Nope." He moved to his window and peeked out. Mal too turned her attention back outside. "That's Auroria," Ben told her, pointing towards the city. "Audrey, Aurora, Phillip, Queen Leah, and their relatives live there." The carriage crept closer to the woods, and Mal watched the sunset over the hills. When a cold breeze tickled her nose and made her sneeze, she moved back inside the carriage.

"What are we going to do while we're there?" Mal asked.

Ben shrugged with a playful smile. "We'll have to see." He said.

Suddenly, everything was warmer. The air changed in an instant. For Mal, it felt like the air pressure had changed just a little, or that there was a new, heavy scent in the air. As for Ben, he turned an immediate shade of blue and began to cough and gasp. Mal gingerly touched his shoulder in alarm as his body was wracked with coughs. Ben bent down and tried to take deep, calming breaths. Mal began to panic. She didn't know how to help people who were choking or keep them from dying. None of her friends were dumb enough to have ever needed medical treatment on the Isle. Finally, after several minutes of gasping, Ben was able to sit up. When he saw Mal's pale face, he smiled and put a hand on her knee.

"Sorry." He gasped. "I was a little worried about that barrier. No one besides Aurora and Audrey has been able to pass it in almost thirty years."

"Barrier?" Mal asked. She looked back out the window. They'd entered the forest area. Behind them, at the field limit, she could see a thin purple film shielding the path. A magical barrier that wasn't visible from the other side. The trees were towering above them, but she could still spot bits of the barrier above the green layer. The air had a feeling like static electricity to it like if she rubbed her hands together, she would shock herself. But unlike static, it felt like she was absorbing it. She turned to Ben, who was regaining color. "Where are we?" She asked though she was starting to get a feeling.

"That was the barrier to the moorland. It consists of the entire west border of Auradon. We're in the outskirts of the Moorland now. I wasn't sure the barrier would let me in with you, but I hoped because I figured you'd want to see where your mom grew up." Ben explained.

"My mom?" Mal asked. The concept felt foreign to her.

"Yeah. You should feel right at home. Maleficent was born and raised here." Ben answered, leaning heavily into the seat as his strength returned to him.

"No way," Mal said, looking out the window in shock.

"Way," Ben responded. He put his head in his hands. Mal frowned and scooted back to him. When she brushed his hand, his skin felt hot.

"You're burning up." She commented.

"I'm lucky to have not passed out touching it," Ben explained.

"Why did we come, if you weren't sure it would work?" Mal asked.

"I wasn't sure it would work for me, but I knew you should be able to get over no matter up. The moorland is inheritance for you. It wouldn't block you out." He drummed his fingers on his knee and sat back up. His skin was finally taking back its healthy pallor. "There's lots of magical creatures out here." He murmured, taking her hand and rubbing it even as he remained hunched over. "You could learn a lot."
Mal blinked and furrowed her brow. Magical creatures? "Are you… encouraging me to learn magic?" She asked.

Ben pretended to toss the idea back and forth with a smirk. The fact his humor had returned was a good sign to Mal. "Maybe." He shrugged.

"No way," Mal whispered. A wide smile spread across her face.

"Hey." Ben held up his hands. "I've known for a long time our laws against magic are wrong. When I learned you had it in you, I knew you could be a powerful force in making those laws fair for everyone. It's what the kingdom needs."

The kingdom? Mal felt a rush of something icy cold run down her spine. "A magically powerful queen-" she started, suddenly doubtful.

"Who will help alleviate racism, bigotry, and the general mistrust of magical creatures and people that began in my parent's reign." Ben interrupted.

Mal blinked. "You're using me as a weapon against closemindedness?" She asked.

"That, and I enjoy your company." Ben decided.

Mal laughed. "You've certainly thought about this a lot." She chuckled as he took her hands and held them.

He met her eyes and smiled. "I have." He agreed. After a few seconds, he followed this thought up with: "I'm glad I didn't marry Audrey."

The thought was so random that Mal had to laugh. "Strangely enough, me too." She agreed. Suddenly, her head was full of ideas. She could learn magic, show Auradon what it meant to be magical, dance around the restrictive laws Belle and Adam had started, and change Auradon for so many people.

Ben continued talking. "Or anyone else in Auradon, or the Isle, or any other daughter of Maleficent." He continued. He squeezed her hands. "I'm happy it's you I get to be stuck with. You understand how hard it is."

"If it had to be anyone." Mal smiled and leaned in to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. His smile stretched even bigger.

The cart rumbled to a stop outside. Ben released Mal's hands as she moved back to the window. The trees were thicker here, and dark. Outside, silvery light moved in the trees, and a number of corpse-like women holding rusty lanterns and dressed in white robes appeared out of the woods. They all appeared to be sleeping as they surrounded the cart. Ben let out a breath, but the people seemed oddly familiar to Mal.

"Who are you?" A voice asked, speaking in otherworldly tones from no distinct source. Their voice sounded mournful and dry. "We recognize you, but we don't know you."

"I am Mal, after Maleficent, my mother. I'm here with my husband Ben. We're on our honeymoon. He wanted to bring me to the place my mother grew up." Mal explained through the window. Something about the women seemed familiar to her as if she'd known them all her life.

"Maleficent? Have you come to renew the moors?" the voice asked again. Mal could only assume it was the disembodied voice of one of the people outside.
"I don't know what that means." Mal murmured. The Enchantress's voice was ringing in her ears. 'Queen on the Ancient Lands'. She swallowed. "Here, can I come outside real quick? It's... weird talking through the window." There was no answer, so Mal climbed over Ben and unlocked the door. Ben followed her out cautiously.

The ground was black, rich with minerals and different types of organic salts. The underbrush was great, and the trail did not continue much further. It broke off into several small, simple footrails instead. Mal knew this was as far as the carriage could go. She walked up to the woman closest to her, whose skeletal hands rested one on her lantern and one on her hip like something was causing her pain there.

"What does it mean, renewing the moors?" Mal asked.

"We must be renewed. We are stifled. Queen Aurora cannot run the moors, and as time goes on and the stretches between visits grow longer and longer our kingdom wilts. We need a ruler to revitalize, renew." The voice sounded broken and desperate. It ripped at her heart.

Mal twisted her hands. "Oh, I just got here. I don't know anything about being a queen of the moors. But, what can I help with?" She bit her cheek. Something was telling her she already knew how this was going to end, but no one could blame her for being nervous, right?

"We need a ruler." The voice broke, and the women all hunched forward as one, as if they were crying. "Heal us, heal us!" They begged. "Your mother was the queen of the moors. We flourished under her hand before wretched Stephan stole her wings. Please, Mal. Please!"

Mal turned to glance nervously at Ben. Ben clearly wasn't quite sure what was going on, but he nodded encouragingly.

Mal furrowed her brow in thought. "I have another kingdom I need to take care of." She warned. "Would you be okay with that?"

"Yes!" The women begged. "Heal us, heal us!"

Mal was completely taken aback. For a second, she almost said no, but then she thought of the people on the Isle and how similar they were. "Okay." Mal agreed. She looked at Ben. "I think I'm about to become Queen of the Moors. Sorry if this wasn't on the itinerary, but these folks need me." Only one day after her conversation with the Enchantress and already the woman was making more sense to her.

Ben nodded and tried to smile, but it was hard with the corpse women surrounding them. He folded his arms and tried to act casual. "Yup, so go and do your thing. Go be awesome." He encouraged.

Mal cracked a smile and turned back to the woman. She had no way of knowing what was about to happen. Out of the woods came thousands and thousands of creature. She could only recognize a minute fraction. There were fairies and miniature dragons flying through the air while Fae people, tree warriors, and three people who seemed to be made out of mossy, grey boulders wandering into the open. Little colorful creatures flew through the air with tiny wings and lighted eyes. A colony of people made out of brightly colored mushrooms trudged around their feet. Pixies carried hedgehogs through the air to Mal's feet, twittering excitedly all the way. Rocks rolled through the trees to spring into the forms of trolls with bright crystals hanging around their necks. Little colonies of living fruit and vegetables came walking past. Other normal creatures, things Mal recognized, came romping through the woods, like mice, ants, grasshoppers, snakes, frogs, and other rodents. Birds flapped overhead and came down to sit on the roof of the carriage and in the trees above. All of the magical creatures ignored Ben as if he were not there. They focused
exclusively on Mal as she watched them come with a wide look in her eyes. When she turned to look at him for reassurance, he put on his biggest smile and nodded.

Mal knelt carefully in front of the withered woman so as not to squish any of the creatures surrounding her. The corpse woman shuffled forward and put her wrinkled hands on Mal's head. A pixie, a male fae, and a rather tall mushroom man with large, crooked teeth rushed forward. They too, put their hands on Mal's head, with the mushroom man having to reach up and the pixie hovering delicately over Mal's head.

The mushroom man went first, sputtering out a series of grunts and rumbles that Mal simply did not understand. The forest creatures went up in a cheer around him. Mal peeked out underneath her eyelashes to watch in amazement as the man spoke, and the rock men straightened up and regained their strength. The tree guards shook their arms as years of moss and wood rot vanished from their joints and weapons. As for the mushroom men, several of them grew a few inches. Their colors grew more vibrant, and their eyes brighter.

When the mushroom man had finished, he had grown an extra six inches, and his teeth had straightened out and become white. Almost all of the forest creatures looked renewed, in fact. Only the corpse women, the fairies, and the fae people waited anxiously. The man stepped out of the circle and went to rejoin his family.

The Fae began to speak as soon as the mushroom man stepped out of the circle. With his words, other creatures popped out of the ground and began to materialize from thin air. The forest grew brighter, and lights sprang forth from the leaves of the trees. The withered October fruit on some of the branches gave way to lovely jewels in the shapes of pears, apples, and pomegranates. Long chains of fine gold dropped from the branches and wove their way into the trunks of the trees so that the forest began to shimmer and glint.

A fine perfume filled the air, and from the ground, thousands of earthworms in millions of bioluminescent colors began to break forth and turn towards her.

When the Fae man was done, he floated away on renewed silvery wings above the heads of all the creatures and took his place beside a tall, regal fae woman.

The pixie began to speak in high, squeaky tones. Ben had the urge to cover his ears. It sounded like a cheese grater working into a block of metal. Thankfully, she talked fast, and the effects of her words were immediate. The barrier, bits of which Ben could see above the trees, solidified into a thick, impenetrable force, just as it had been in the days of lore. It became white instead of a polluted purple, and the parts that had been thin filled themselves in.

Finally, the withered corpse woman shuffled a little closer to Mal. "Command." She said in a stern, firm voice. "Decide. Receive. Speak. Renew." On the word renew, white light escaped from the woman and her waxy friends. Their aging marks vanished, and they became as young ladies of the court. "Arise." On the command, Mal felt invisible strings began to pull her to a standing position. She got to her feet without the woman removing her hands. "Become." The woman finished and took her hands from Mal's head. Her face was still, despite its renewal, clothed in sleep. She and her companions turned and shuffled away. Everyone in the clearing watched as their feet avoided the smooth roots and groves in the soil. Before they were out of sight, the disembodied voice said: "Love." And then Mal got the feeling she was gone.

The forest went up in cheers. A group of pixies brought forth a crown made of white vines, which Mal accepted without a second thought. Her Auradon crown was at home in her dresser while she was away.
Ben went to stand beside her. "Who was that?" He asked.

Mal blinked. It hadn't been any other ordinary creature. She didn't even have a name for the reanimated figures for a few seconds. Then the information appeared on the tip of her tongue. She smiled at Ben and gestured to where they had disappeared. "That was the Spirit of the Moors. She is connected to everything here around us, and sleeps in the center of the land."

Ben let out a breath. He was staring at her in dumbfounded amazement. Mal felt her cheeks go a little pink as her new one-word blessings started to ricochet off the insides of her skull along with everything the enchantress had said. Love. The Spirit of the Moors had blessed her with love. And what that meant, Mal didn't know. Maybe it was love for the people and the grounds. Maybe it was love for Ben. Or maybe it was just in a general sense, a greater capacity to love. All she could tell for sure was that this was a moment that would change her life forever. Mal bent down as small creatures rushed to her feet to shake her hand and chatter excitedly. Every single little word was clear to her, and she found herself speaking back in the exact languages she needed to speak. Ben watched with a smile as Mal extended her finger to shake hands with the smaller ones. Fairies and Pixies were taking up residence in her hair, causing the strands to fly out around her head. Many Fae children were rushing forward with gifts of clear stones and white twigs.

They ushered Mal away from him. Ben did his best to follow at her side, but the creatures were persistent. They ignored him as he apologized for stepping over and sometimes dangerously near them. Only a squirrel paused to chatter at him as he romped behind Mal. Mal got the feeling that the moor landers were not nearly as impressed with a human prince as Auradon was.

She was led to the edge of a polluted river, and knowledge started to fill her head. Despite all the great good the renewal had completed, certain species had not been around to renew the portions of the moors they'd shouldered to maintain all these years. These she would have to personally cleanse before the magical creatures could return to help her. As water sprites and magical fish swam towards her, she graced the top of the waters with her hand. The water became clear, and the sprites began to cry, adding to the beautiful water. Lighted flowers and stones littered the floor of the river. Large quantities of water sprites rose up over the ripples to greet the new queen. It was an amazing sight, but Mal suddenly felt exhausted. The rush of magic was new and hard for her to control.

Mal looked back for Ben and noticed he was trailing father and farther behind. She reached out a hand for him, and after a moment's deliberation, he went to her. "You want me up here?" He asked her softly.

"Of course." Mal nodded as they took each other's hands. "We did agree to work together, right?" She went on her tip-toes to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then, she turned to all the creatures around them. "This is my husband." She told everyone. "His name is Ben. Please be nice to him." She repeated her statement in a few different ways until everyone was nodding along.

The creatures looked at him as if for the first time. They reached up, and Ben bent down to shake a few of their hands. A small bird-like pixie shook his finger, then flew off giggling. A blue mushroom child with a flower growing atop his head shook his hand shyly and asked something in a language Ben did not understand. He looked up at Mal for help.

"He's asking if you're also a king." Mal translated with a smile.

"Oh," Ben said. He turned his attention to the child. "I'm the king of the kingdom outside of yours. That way." He used a spare hand to point. Mal translated in a language that sounded like clicks and beeps. The child smiled brightly and hugged Ben's entire hand to his body. He was only as tall as Ben's elbow and rather pudgy, but the hug filled Ben with the feeling of a warm blanket falling
over his shoulder. He smiled brightly.

"Since when do you know any of the moor languages?" Ben asked Mal.

She shrugged. "I don't know." She responded. It must have started with the blessing to 'speak'.

The moon climbed into the sky as the night wore on. Ben stayed by Mal's side, which she was extremely grateful for. She walked around her kingdom, purifying a few things and places that had not been cleansed during her appointment as queen. There was still lots of natural, non-magical damage, but the big things had been fixed. Mal was exhausted. The magic of the moors was the type that needed a filter to cleanse it. It flowed through Mal like natural magic did and then was cleansed just being in her presence, but the more it happened the sleepier she became. At long last, Ben laid down in the roots of a large tree with beautiful white veins threading up the trunk. Mal sat beside him as she finished a conversation with three fae women. It was clear they were both having trouble staying awake. One by one, the woodland creatures went their separate ways to leave the two alone.

When all the woodland creatures had left for the night, Mal laid her head down beside Ben's. The tree roots hollowed out into an alcove of soft grass where they curled up together. She folded her arms under her head and buried her face away from the light of the trees above. Ben let a soft smile pull at his lips, and then turned towards her. He slipped an arm around her waist and let his eyes drift closed at the end of another extremely long day.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast (1991 & 2017), Frozen, Hercules, Cinderella, Bambi, Meet the Robinsons, Big Hero Six, the Aristocats, or Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Duration of Ben and Mal's time at the moorlands.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was giggling nearby. Mal screwed her face up, then wrenched her eyes open. A group of nine fairies about four inches high was gathered near her head, playing with strands of her hair. They were all different colors of the rainbow, with one black and one white fairy. Their skin tones matched perfectly with their wings, while their hair, outfits, and jeweled eyes were a darker shade of the color they represented. Their wings were uniquely circular.

When the fairies noticed Mal was awake, they jumped up and scurried off. Mal scrunched up her eyes and then rolled onto her side. Ben began to wake up beside her as his arm was dislodged from around her spine. The two new rulers sat up, rubbing their eyes and yawning widely.

"Good morning." Ben greeted Mal as he rubbed the feeling back into his legs. His shirt was ruffled and his hair twisted oddly to the side.

"It is morning." She affirmed, chuckling as he ran his hands through his hair, trying to straighten it and making it much worse. She got to her feet carefully and ruffled his hair into his eyes.

"Your hair is curly," Ben told her as he pushed his now-ratty hair back and squinted through the sunlight.

Mal felt her hair. It had, indeed, been curled into many tiny, springy curls. She wondered if it was a result of sleeping beside a magical tree, or if the fairies or woodland creatures had done it in her sleep. Since she'd become queen, a sense of familiarity had entered her. She considered for a second, and then called out: "Thank you!" To their surroundings. Something inside her told her that whoever had done it had heard her thanks.

She helped Ben to his feet. He swayed a little and rested a hand on her shoulder. When he focused again, he smiled at her. "You look different." He said. "Lighter."

Mal stretched her arms out. "I feel lighter." She said. She popped her shoulders and then all the joints in her fingers before she stretched out her legs. Ben watched her, silently contemplating. Besides her curly hair, her eyes seemed even more green than usual, almost like they had fire behind her irises.
"So, where do you fit in here?" Ben asked. "Like, what was Maleficent's species?"

"Mom was a fae," Mal answered. "She told me that a long time ago. Fae are basically the balance between fairies and humans. I'm half fae because my father was human."

"Hey," He started, clapping his hands together, "If you're part fae and you have horns you can will in and out of your head, do you think you also have wings?" He made a series of pretty-pathetic flapping motions with his hands.

"I don't know," Mal admitted, pausing to consider the idea. Maleficent, of course, had had wings that Auradon had let King Stefan carve off. And sure, if she had her mother's horns, there wasn't really a reason she shouldn't have wings. "Maybe?"

Ben shrugged. "Just a thought." He assured her, though it was clear the idea appealed to him. Mal chuckled.

Ben and Mal wandered underneath the trees of the moorland together, chatting and picking fruit off of trees. Mal seemed to know which ones were actually jewels, and which ones only had a jeweled texture. Ben could tell no difference, but when Mal began to peel the garnet covering off of a pomegranate the size of a baseball, there had been real fruit underneath. On the other hand, when Ben tried to bite into a jeweled apple, he had discovered nothing under the surface except more gem. Mal chuckled and explained that it was a dead fruit. If fruit wasn't eaten in a certain amount of time, it hardened into a gem. She picked a different apple for him, and they continued their walk.

Down by the river, a group of long-faced fae women waited. There were four in all, and each had various patterns in different colors of skin in place of tones or shades. A lady with black dots across her eyes stood to greet them.

"Queen Mal and King Ben." She greeted. Ben was so relieved to hear something in English addressed to him he almost tripped and fell into the crystal waters of the lagoon. "We are pleased to see you awake."

"Thank you for letting us sleep," Mal said, clasping her hands and shifting her weight from foot to foot. "I understand it is exciting for you to see so much renewal after so many years."

"It is." The fae nodded with a satisfied smile. "I regret to inform you we will soon have invaders." She pointed in the general direction that Ben and Mal had entered the moors from. "The former queen and an escort, her daughter. Should we stop them at the wayside or allow her into the moors?"

Oh, Audrey and Aurora. Mal looked unsure. She examined the three other Fae women, who looked to her expectantly for directions.

Ben put a hand on her shoulder. "Aurora, as the queen, would have felt her magical control over the moors leave her when you adopted the title of queen. She'll naturally come down to make sure everything is okay. Hopefully, she'll see reason in you claiming heritage over her." He explained.

Mal nodded thoughtfully. "I don't think it's wise to invite her onto home turf... it might be hard to get her to leave." She looked up to see what he thought of that reasoning. He nodded in agreement.

"That's smart." Ben encouraged her.

Mal stood a little straighter. "I'll go down to the borders and linger on our land until I see Aurora. Then I'll explain everything being as honest as I can be. If she reacts well, I will inform the
inhabitants and they can decide if they would like to allow her access to the land. If she reacts badly, I will leave the conversation and refuse her access entirely. Let her slather my name until I return to Auradon and explain the situation before the king and queen." She glanced at Ben briefly. "My new in-laws." She smirked.

The fae laughed, which sounded a bit like a gust of wind. Something tapped Mal's foot. She looked down to see a grey rabbit. "Care for an escort?" It asked in a voice that sounded a bit sniffly, as if the poor thing had a cold.

"Thank you," Mal told it. It began to hop off. Mal started to follow it but paused when she saw Ben remain rooted to his spot. She turned and raised an eyebrow.

Ben shifted his weight from foot to foot. "This is your duty as queen," He told her. "You seem to know what you're doing. Are you sure you want me tagging along?"

"Yes." She replied. She surprised herself with how quickly she answered. It just seemed like the nicest option. She met Ben's eyes. "You're only the King in title, just like I am for Auradon, but I want everyone to know I trust you and your ideas. I want them to learn to trust you as an outsider. It'll help bring Auradon closer to the moors. As I recall you saying, no one has journeyed back and forth since before my mother was banished to the Isle of the Lost, yes?"

"That's right." Ben exhaled. "It's just, I can't do magic or understand anyone. I feel pretty inadequate next to you."

"Don't." Mal reprimanded him. "We're a team. Working together, right?" Ben hesitated and then nodded. She looked back up at the grey rabbit. "We're coming!" She called. She offered her arm to Ben, which momentarily threw him off guard. Normally, he was the one offered his arm. After a brief fumble, they walked after the rabbit as he sniffed ahead of them, leading them onward to the path.

Their carriage had remained stopped where the spirit of the moors had come upon them the night before. Ben and Mal followed the rabbit past it and down the dirt path. The further they went, the less the magical trees sprouted. The inner grove of the moors gave way to normal trees where normal forest residents reigned. Birds flew past twittering and squirrels chattered down at them from treetops.

At long last, the now-white outer border of the moors came into place. Mal thanked the rabbit, who disappeared off into the woods. They crept nearer the border and heard voices.

"It's so odd." A woman was saying. "The border has changed color. It was like this a long, long time ago, but the last few years it has been purple."

"It was green when I came with you that first time," Mal heard Audrey say. She wasn't as loud as Mal recalled. She walked a few steps through the trees with Ben creeping behind her. Sleeping Beauty came into view, dressed in a pink outing gown, and with a delicate golden crown tucked into her curled blonde hair. Audrey was still out of sight. They were circling around the outside, staring at the barrier, which was apparently now visible from the outside.

"Have you not been able to get in before?" Audrey asked. Mal's eyes flickered around, and she finally spotted Audrey as she walked back towards her mother. Audrey was dressed in pale pink with a white clutch in her hands. Her hair had been pulled back into a high ponytail.

"No," Aurora shook her head. "Ever since I was twelve, I've always been able to-" She stopped as her eyes fell on Mal. Mal, knowing she'd been seen, emerged from the trees. Ben lingered in the
shadows. Mal smoothed herself out, knowing she was still wearing her outfit from yesterday.  

"Hello, Aurora." She greeted. Her voice was a little quieter than she expected. She took a shaky breath and dug her nails into her palms. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Mal."  

Aurora, to her surprise, smiled kindly. "Queen Mal." She greeted. "This makes sense."  

Audrey looked absolutely disgusted. "You? How are you here? Aren't you supposed to be parading around with Ben and-"  

"Audrey." Aurora sent her daughter a reproachful look. "This is our queen, and she has been promised to bring our kingdoms joy. Despite past altercations, you should treat her with more respect." She blinked twice and returned her blue gaze to Mal. "It is nice to meet you. I have many questions if you have time."  

"I didn't walk down here to admire the view, unfortunately." Mal shrugged. "I was told you were coming. I suppose you're wondering what happened to the moors last night?"  

"Not anymore." The queen admonished with a dismissive wave of her hand. "It's quite clear you've claimed your birthright, which is good news." She let out a little breath of relief. "I admit, the moors have become more and more polluted of late years. I suppose it was rather shortsighted of your mother to crown me over the moors. I have no magical power to renew them by, and they have suffered much." She hummed in thought. "The fruit died off the trees, some species faded and dissolved to try and keep the barrier at strength. Of course, when Maleficent crowned me, she attempted to unite my kingdom and hers, but the formation of Auradon nullified most of her spell. I barely had the power to cross over." She shook her head. "You'll be taking over, then?"  

"Yes, ma'am," Mal affirmed. She dwelt briefly on Aurora's words and then opened her mouth to speak. "I would offer you passage into the moors, but I agreed that I would allow the residents here to decide whom they wanted to visit. I don't know yet how open they are to outsiders. They've accepted Ben with me, but I have not had much time to ask them." She suspected that they wouldn't take kindly to the idea of more Auradonians. For some of the creatures, even Ben was a stretch.  

Aurora held up her hands in submission. "I completely understand. They likely resent me for not being able to help them for so many long years. It is a good thing you came along when you did." She hesitated. "I do hope they allow me back in one day. After all, I will not be young forever, and I would like to see the place I first fell in love with back when I was a child." A serene look settled on her face as waves of memories flooded her. Mal waited patiently for Aurora to snap back to the present.  

"Thank you, Queen Aurora," Mal said honestly. "Your approval means more than you could imagine." And truthfully, Mal's throat was tight.  

"You're okay with this?" Audrey asked her mother in creduculously. "Why? Maleficent gave the moors to you."  

"Yes, she did," Aurora agreed, studying Mal. "And it's well overtime she took them back. I'm not fit to be the ruler of something I cannot understand." She brushed her dress off as the tips of Mal's ears began to turn red.  

Audrey fumed. "Well, I'm going to take this up with Ben!" She snapped. "It can't be right!"

"I'm right here," Ben said, only loud enough to be heard. He walked out of the shadows and went to stand beside Mal. "I saw everything, and the fact that Aurora supports Mal makes it more than
okay. Audrey, this needed to happen otherwise the moors would have died."

Audrey looked absolutely shocked. It was clear she hadn't expected Ben to materialize out of the trees. She clamped her lips shut and turned to begin to walk back in the general direction of the path. Mal assumed she and her mother had a carriage or a car waiting. Aurora pursed her lips.

"Please excuse her." She started with a huff. "Audrey is impatient and has been rather touchy on the subject of the moors ever since the fairies chased her out as a child." Aurora let out a breath. "We'll depart now. Congratulations on your marriage and have fun on your honeymoon."

Ben wrapped his arms around Mal's as the two women waved goodbye to each other. She let out a deep breath as Aurora walked out of sight.

"I honestly didn't think I would ever have to do that," Mal told Ben.

"You did well." He complimented her.

Mal bit her lip and she pondered the conversation she had just had. "She's such a nice lady... how did she end up with such a self-centered daughter?" She asked Ben.

Ben shifted uncomfortably. "Keeping in mind I did date her for a while, I have no idea. Audrey never understood the concept of helping others beyond just trying to look good in their eyes. I think it might have been a result of Leah being such a big influence on Audrey, but I honestly don't know what went on in their family."

Mal shrugged and slipped out of his grasp. She turned and fixed the collar of his shirt, deep in thought. "It's... gratifying. I honestly expected her to hate me. My mother cursed her and her kingdom asleep, then she almost incinerated her boyfriend, and then I swipe you away from Audrey... She's probably one of the most saintly people I've met."

Ben nodded. "Aurora is an example if nothing else. A lot of people think she's weak because her fairytale places her as a victim, not a hero, but she has a lot of strength and courage."

Mal hummed. She began to walk back to the path. Ben followed at her side. As they walked and their hands swung beside each other, he took her fingers and linked their hands together. He led her back to the carriage so that they could find their suitcases and pull a fresh change of clothes out. They took turns changing inside the carriage. Ben changed into blue jeans and a blue, woven, button-up shirt that he rolled up to his elbows. Mal cautiously picked out black pants and a black tank-top with a see-through purple top. When she stepped out of the carriage, she turned and examined him to see what he had to say.

He smiled. "That's a cool look. I don't think I've seen your shoulders before."

"I could say the same to you." Mal frowned. "You always wear long sleeves and pants." She crossed her arms around her chest and took a few steps back.

Ben rolled his eyes and examined her outfit briefly. He held out his hand for her to take and Mal slowly curled their fingers together. She didn't think that Ben had seen the mark yet.

"So, I have a question." Ben began as they wandered underneath the trees together, back into the magical portions of the moorlands. Mal turned her head to the side to acknowledge that she'd heard him. "Why didn't the Moors just pick a new queen when everything started to go bad?"

Mal bit her lip. "I'm not sure." She admitted. "Maybe it was the way the moors were set up? Or maybe it was magical inherit- actually, I have no idea." She continued chewing on her bottom lip,
and then led Ben back to the river where they had last seen the Fae women. They were still there. "Excuse me?" She called. "We have a few questions."

The women turned as they saw the two coming and nodded cordially. "Queen Mal." They chorused. "That was fast."

"Just Mal." Mal requested, drawing closer to them and still leading Ben behind her. "And yes, there were no problems. But Ben and I have questions about the state of the moors and a couple of other things."

"We're happy to help you." A brown-skinned fae woman with eyes that looked inverted, with long lashes on the lower lid, smiled.

"Why didn't the moors pick a new queen when Aurora could not help you?" Mal asked, squeezing Ben's hand as he stood beside her.

The Fae woman nodded in understanding and straightened up. "Before Maleficent, we existed peacefully. We relied on the thick outskirts and our guards to keep up safe. However, as the kingdom grew more hostile, we found ourselves having to leave occasionally to defend ourselves. Maleficent led us on as she tried to defend her homeland. We accepted her as a ruler in times of trouble and she agreed to lead us to victory and step down. That all changed when Wretched Stefan stole her wings. She became ruthless and full of the spirit of revenge. Her magic took on a new form in her anger, and she used the leadership we had already given her to gain power from the Spirit of the Moors. This gave her even more power, and she erected a wall of thorns to keep out the invaders while she sought to eradicate Wretched Stefan. We accepted her as our sole ruler and protector, and the new title of a queen was formed. It was formed from the unanimous mix of the Moorish spirit's approval, our consent to be governed, and the power that Maleficent had. Since those three requirements had not been met until last night, we were unable to form a new crown, or rip the old one from Aurora."

The information was so dense it made Mal stop to process it for a second. "So... the title of the queen was a magical binding that Maleficent received because the spirit of the moors gave it to her, the Moorish people accepted her, and she was as powerful as her surroundings were?" She asked.

"Exactly." The fae women nodded together.

Ben let out a low whistle. "How powerful are you, exactly?" He asked Mal, staring at their surrounding in surprise.

"She was much more powerful than the Moors were last night." The fae woman informed him. "Her magical potential far usurped that of the entire diminished nation. Today, that would not be true. The land is more powerful than the queen as a whole. But so much of the magic had been polluted and diminished that she was able to fulfill the requirements at the time of the binding at the time we needed her. As she continues to strengthen us, we will strengthen her."

"Like a filter?" Ben asked.

"Exactly." The fae nodded with a smile.

"So, you couldn't choose a new queen because no one was powerful enough with the barrier decomposing?" Ben asked. The fae woman nodded in approval, and Ben let out a breath.

"Why would Maleficent have given the title to Aurora, if she knew this would happen?" Mal asked with a furrowed brow.
"That was before Auradon." The fae woman with the inverted eyes informed her. She looked up to Ben. "Surely you know bits about the barrier your country imposes?"

Ben nodded and turned his head to face Mal. "A barrier stretches around all of Auradon for, I think, one hundred miles into the sea, except for the western border where the moors lie and, now, the acreage surrounding the Isle of the Lost. It protects Auradon climates, helps Triton in the seas with his job as underwater ruler and Zeus with the skies, and also lets me, the king, know when things are crossing into and out of the border. We don't have any neighbors except for the moors because when the barrier first went up, the moors were at full power and they resisted becoming part of Auradon. Therefore, the barrier cut Auroria off of the moors despite the fact Maleficent had decreed Aurora, the queen of Auroria, to be the queen of the moors as well. Because of Maleficent's battles with Auroria, people worried that the moors would attack Auradon at some point, so we sealed them out to become their own separate nation."

"Which effectively severed Auroria from the Moors." Mal realized. "So, therefore, Aurora was forced to stay in Auradon as a citizen and that's why it became difficult for her to return to the moors. She had to leave the country and-"

"Couldn't always come back in." Ben nodded. "Phillip used to have to call my dad if she got stuck in the moorlands. And when she had Audrey, it became a really bad thing that she couldn't always get back."

"So she came less and less…” Mal continued thinking. "But why did the land start to decay? If she was still coming, then-"

"The spirit of the moors used to keep the land healthy simultaneously, no matter what." The same fae woman with long eyelashes answered. "But when she gave her blessing to Maleficent, she left the power to heal the land in your mother's hands. Which Maleficent passed to Aurora, who couldn't use the complete ability since she was not magical, although that wasn't a problem since Maleficent lived here anyways and her power was usually enough to keep things running."

"But then there was the war, and my mother left to fight." Mal prodded.

"Auradon considered her a villain." The fae with black dots in her eyes reminded them. "When they discovered she was alive and living in the moors, they got the idea to capture her and seal her away so she'd never curse anyone again. Maleficent left to fight the war of villains, and Auradon sealed themselves away, and we know not what happened to her after that."

"She was sent to the Isle of the Lost," Mal informed them. "It's where I grew up. It's a large Island, maybe a fifth of the size of Auradon, that is on their southern border. They locked all of the villains on there, continued exiling people over, and now the land is overrun by villains and people who are trying to keep safe from the villainy. She still lives there."

Ben's brow was furrowed as he thought. "I didn't realize Auradon had picked a fight with Maleficent." He considered. "I was just told she led the villain's side."

"They came for her in the early hours." A new fae woman with red skin and purple eyes spoke up from behind her two friends. "And they told her that they were taking her away, and she locked up the moors to hide from them. Later, we received tell that the same thing was happening to others around the land, and she left to defend the people like her, even though she didn't agree with many of them. She never came back."

"No wonder your mother was so angry at us." Ben exhaled. "We took… everything."
Mal rolled her eyes. "I told you your people were cruel." She reminded him in a haughty tone. She sighed and turned to face Ben. "Do you have the power to open the border up to be like the rest of Auradon? So people can go back and forth and-

"Your Highness." The fae with the inverted eyes interrupted crossly. "With all due respect, Auradon has forced us through thirty long years of solitude. None of us wish to see Auradonians for a very long, long time." Her eyes hovered on Ben distastefully. She hadn't minded him when they were speaking of history, but Mal could see clearly now how everyone was uncomfortable around him, the Auradon king who'd been on the throne for two days.

Ben let go of Mal's hand. He set his hand on Mal's shoulder instead. "Maybe one day our countries will be able to heal. For now, the moors need a lot of help. I think you have your work more than cut out between the Isle and healing all the damage in the moors without bringing Auradon politics into this."

Mal's eyes flickered between Ben and the fae women, who were relaxing a little at his words. She nodded. "You're right." She agreed. "But… I don't want to be a mediator. I want us all to work together."

"Eventually." The red-skinned fae woman said through tight lips.

"Me personally, there are a few people I wouldn't mind cursing." The last fae of the group said crossly. She had pale green hair and odd lighting-like patterns on her skin. She held up her hands and began counting off in an increasingly-angry tone. "Wretched Stefan, Flora, Fauna, Merriweather, King Beast-"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Mal said immediately. Ben looked a little pale. "I'm sure you have your reasons, what with the barrier and everything, but we needn't start making a hit list."

"Thank you for helping us," Ben said softly, looking more than a little alarmed at the mention of his dad. "You've been a wonderful, ahem, help." He moved his hand to her other shoulder so that his arm was around her. Mal went a bit stiff as he covered the mark of Maleficent without even realizing it was there.

They exchanged nods and Ben and Mal walked away. Ben cleared his throat once they were out of earshot. "Maybe I should, ah, lie low?" He asked.

Mal made a face. "I don't want that. I think you're okay to stay with me. I already told everyone to treat you kindly, and they seem to like you despite the fact you're not Moorish." She let out a sigh. "I'm sorry about them mentioning your dad."

Ben shrugged, looking a bit uncomfortable. "I kind of get it. It was Dad's decision on a lot of this stuff that hurt them." He cleared his throat. "I'll open the barrier on this side as we leave, but the Moors have their own barrier that will keep Auradonians out."

"Okay," Mal whispered. "Did that, um, answer all your questions?"

"Actually, I have one more." Ben's face broke into a smile as he stopped her and turned her to face him with a bright smile. "About you and your magic." He clarified. "How powerful are you?" He asked.

Mal laughed. "How am I supposed to know?" She asked. "I got here last night."

"Try something," Ben said with a laugh.
Mal laughed with some unease. She looked at her hands and then held one up. Ben made to take it, but then a bright green flame appeared in Mal's palm, just as suddenly as if she'd dropped a match on kerosene. She let out a nervous laugh as the flame grew on to her fingertips. Ben laughed with her. "That's extraordinary!" He proclaimed. Mal laughed and waved her hand to make the fire go out.

"Don't get too close to me, or you'll get burned, your highness." She teased him.

"There are crimes for attacking a member of the royal family. Wouldn't want people to start assuming you're taking after your mother." Ben returned, still laughing.

"Well, if you play with fire you're going to get burned." Mal laughed.

Ben laughed as she began to walk away, leading him aimlessly down a different path. His laughter cut off abruptly the moment her back was turned, and the laughter died in her throat. An icy cold crept down her spine, and she turned back around. Ben was staring at her with an odd little smile frozen on his mouth. He looked like he'd glimpsed something incredibly funny or odd but hadn't quite had the time to process it. He put a hand on her shoulder – the right one, without the mark – and turned her back around. He used his finger to trace the black mark carefully. "What's this?" He asked.

"It's… the mark of Maleficent." Mal told him. She reached up and covered it as she turned to look over her shoulder at him. He looked enchanted, which was not a response she'd expected from him. "I've had it since I was small. I don't know if I was born with it or if it's something my mom did to me, but-

"It's cool." He told her. "I like it a lot. The dragon."

"Really?" Mal asked. "I was a bit concerned you'd think it was… ugly?"

"No." Ben shook his head. A broader smile spread across his face. "That's why you were so hesitant at the carriage. I get it now." He continued tracing the mark, looking completely fascinated by it. Mal let him. She could count on her hands the people who'd seen her mark or that knew she had it. Sophia and Belle, as of her wedding day, Evie and Jay but not Carlos, yet, Uma and Harry, her mother and the Evil Queen. That was it. And now Ben, who was absolutely entranced by the idea of it.

"Can I move your shirt a little?" He asked. "Just to see it?"

"Um." Mal felt a lump rise in her throat. "I can." She told him, sliding the fabric down and off her shoulder so that the curling dragon was clearly exposed. He let out a breath.

"That looks way cool. It's almost… sinister." He told her.

Mal pulled a face. "You like that?" She asked.

Ben shrugged. "It's fascinating." He told her and then took a few steps back. Mal replaced her neckline and turned around. Ben still had an enchanted smile stuck to his face as he shook his head. "You're way cool." He told her.

"Because I have a dragon tattoo?" Mal laughed. "You're ridiculous." She patted his shoulder.

"What do you want to do now?" She asked.

"Let's explore," Ben responded immediately. "The moors are huge, and there's so much to see. Let's see what there is."
"Okay." Mal agreed. She held out her hand for him and he took it, and together they began to wander the moorlands together.

Only a week into their honeymoon in the fading light of the day, Ben watched as Mal talked to a water sprite in a language that sounded like water splashing and contemplated his own existence. The more he watched her, the thicker the air seemed.

Fairies were crowded in her hair. They flew around her head, occasionally distracting her, and played with strands of her hair. Her horns were out. She'd shown some of the Pixies earlier today, and they had loved them so much that Mal had kept them out. It was a bit of an effort, but she blended right in with the other fae folk with them.

She was beautiful. The last week had lit something within her that he had rarely seen in Auradon, and she was witty and fiery. She'd used more magic to summon things, change things, and heal creatures than Ben had seen in all the previous years of his life. They'd done some sparring, to which she was badly beaten but still happier than he'd seen her. Being away from the toxic presence of the citizen's prying eyes and away from their responsibilities was a miracle for them both.

Mal finished her conversation with the sprite and turned to look at Ben. She smiled a lopsided smile. He waved shyly. While Mal was often surrounded by new parents vying for her to meet their children and older spirits who had known her mother, most of the creatures ignored Ben in favor of Mal. Ben couldn't exactly blame them. She was amazing. Sometimes he felt a bit lonely while she spoke to all her new friends, but it was nice to not be in the spotlight after so many harsh months of people picking him apart.

Beside the river, Mal carefully stood up and walked towards him. The pixies giggled as a couple settled on her shoulders or held onto her horns. She sat down beside him with a little smile.

"What did you learn this time?" He asked, elbowing her playfully as the pixies waved at him with dramatic giggles.

Mal's smile faded a little. "Actually... something sad. I wanted to ask you about it."

Ben straightened up and angled his frame to face her. "Okay, what is it?" He asked.

Mal twiddled her fingers and stared at the ground. The pixies exchanged looks. "King Stefan, he didn't start off as a king, right?" Mal began, glancing up at him momentarily.

"Oh, no," Ben answered. He slumped a little. King Stefan was, well, an Auradonian villain who never got what was coming to him. It was embarrassing, really, what the government had let him do to Maleficent, to his kingdom, and to his family. "He won a contest of sorts that Leah's father put out."

"Whoever could kill my mother would get the kingdom." Mal recited softly. Ben frowned. She sighed and straightened back up. "Anyway, of course, he didn't kill her because she's still alive. The sprites have been saying... they were friends. And I didn't know that. They were friends, but he drew apart as they got older. One night he came back, and they made reparations. And when she fell asleep, he took her wings off with iron."

Ben sucked in a breath. "I, um, don't know all of the details." He sighed. "I know that Maleficent had wings. I know Stefan carved them off in public many years ago before Maleficent was sent to the Isle, and that it was the second time because she stole her wings back from his palace where he
kept them for years and yeah, there was a contest. I heard my parents talking with Aurora and Phillip years ago, and I do know that there were drugs involved. Stefan… he liked to brag.” Ben trailed off, feeling absolutely rotten on Stefan's behalf.

Mal made an unhappy sort of sound in the back of her throat. "That's awful. Imagine waking up and missing a part of yourself." She glanced sideways at Ben and shuffled her feet. His mouth went dry and he immediately held his hands up.

Before she could open her mouth to say anything else, Ben beat her to it. "I'd never do that to you." He promised. "Believe me. Stefan was a monster even by Auradonian terms. I would never think to rob you of… any part of yourself. I meant what I said in my vows. If you ever are hurt, it will never be by my hand."

Mal smiled. "Thank you." She said softly.

Ben took her hand. "I mean to make reparations." He murmured. "It won't be easy, but it will be worth it; you are worth it." He stopped when he saw the color filling her cheeks. "I know Auradon made many, many mistakes. I know how evil you think we are. But I'm going to try and usher in a new era, where people like you don't have to be misunderstood and people like Audrey will be more tolerant. I truly believe we can right wrongs. We can change the path we're on and start a new era - together." He waited with bated breath for her reply and couldn't deny he was apprehensive. He wanted her to know he was being honest and that he meant every word with fervor because he didn't know how else to express this growing fire that was exploding inside of him. He'd never felt like this with anyone before - never liked anyone in the way he liked Mal.

Mal didn't say anything. She stared at Ben with her mouth partially open for a few seconds. He watched the gears turn in her head. She took his head in her hands and pulled him to her to kiss him. The pixies squealed and rushed away, giggling and blushing as they disappeared. Since his mouth was a bit open, she bit his tongue accidentally before Ben leaned into her and carefully put his hands on her back. By god, she was amazing.

He liked her. He liked her a lot. Her kisses were something to him that Audrey's had never been and he was absolutely exhilarated. The more she was around, the more they talked, the better they got along, the more he was sure of what he was feeling. He was in love. And that feeling shocked him because love was something that had happened forty years ago when people's lives were in danger and before everyone's lives had gone perfect, magic had been banned, and true love had ceased to exist. But this was something he'd never felt for anyone, and he could only describe it with that dated term: 'love'. He loved her. He was in love with her. He was falling in love with her, more and more. This was like his parents had described to him - true love, thirty years after true love had become scarce in Auradon, or so he'd thought.

After several seconds, they broke away. Ben leaned his forehead on hers. "We can do this." He told her.

"We can." She confirmed. And something in her told her for the first time it was possible. She could do this - with him.

"Ready, set, go." Ben counted back, aloud. There was a flash of silver and the sharp clang of metal. Mal was thrown back onto her rear with a growl as the reverberation of Ben's sword hitting hers sent her tumbling backward. She managed to block him as he took a downward slash and slowly made her way to her feet. She began to force him back with several calculated slashes directed at his legs, arms, and chest. Ben was forced to take a few steps back until his back hit a tree. He quickly blocked her next move and locked swords with her. Mal dug her toes in, but Ben
simply slid her back a few inches into the soil.

"Ha, ha." He laughed at her and released the lock. They both rushed at each other, swords clanging and catching the light above their heads as they attacked each other. Pixies and miniature Harpies were hiding in the branches above their heads, letting out piercing squeals every time their swords clanged against each others.

Both Ben and Mal's swords made a horrible grinding sound as they pulled them out of a lock at the same time. Mal took a jibe that Ben was forced to dodge before Ben stomped down on Mal's boot and locked swords with her again. The creatures above their heads went crazy as Mal struggled to keep her balance while Ben edged her into a ferocious backbend that she'd probably feel for the next day. With a little growl, she lit her eyes up. Ben's sword took on a life of its own and flew out of his grasp, landing embedded in a nearby tree. Both he and she lost their balance and collapsed, though Ben began struggling to his feet. "Cheater!" He stuck out his tongue at her.

"You let go first!" Mal rolled her eyes as she stood up and dusted herself off. Ben growled as he went to the tree and yanked his sword out of the back. Silver sap rushed out and almost immediately formed a bumpy resin on the outside of the tree. Ben shook his head and sat beside the tree to begin cleaning it off.

"Look at what you're doing to your Kingdom, Mal." He scolded. "And by the way, you still haven't won. If anything, you're disqualified for cheating."

"You know what we call disqualification on the Isle, Ben?" Mal asked in a sugary-sweet tone.

"Dismemberment?" Ben replied, completely sarcastic. Mal threw back her head and laughed. He frowned. "Wait, was that actually the right answer?" He asked. Mal nodded through her laughter. He grumbled, scrubbing the sap off his sword as Mal continued laughing.

"Well, you lost." Mal chuckled, catching her breath and walking forward to rest a bare arm on Ben's shoulder. "Can I have your sword now?"

"No." Ben shook his head. "You cheated. You can have that sword when you earn it without cheating."

Mal laughed and didn't press the matter. Ben pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the back of his neck down with it. He offered it to her, and she quickly did the same with her face before plopping down in the dirt next to him. "Any tips?" She asked.

"You're still not moving fast enough." Ben scoffed. "I know that's your strategy – move fast and play smart. But you keep getting stuck under the same simple locks." He elbowed her. "What about for me?" He asked.

Mal smirked. "You've got to stop staring at me." She teased. Ben rolled his eyes. "Okay," Mal sobered up a little. "I honestly don't have that much to say to you. I seriously don't know who's better at this point: you or Jay. And I honestly am beginning to think you're just too powerful for me to beat without a sneaky plan in place."

"Or magic." Ben laughed.

"Or magic." Mal agreed. She set her sword down in between her and Ben.

Ben snorted a little. "You did better this time around. I think if you protect your frame a bit more you wouldn't struggle with having to best my strength all the time because we all know how well that's going for you."
"See?" Mal snorted, elbowing him a little. "You need to stop staring at me."

"I'm not staring!" Ben denied. "You just want to believe I am."

Mal hummed as Ben finished picking the worst of the resin off his sword and set it down. They leaned into each other's shoulder. It was midday, and the sun was beating down on them through the trees. Mal yawned. "We should try fist fighting." She told him.

"Absolutely not." Ben immediately declined, letting his eyes drift closed.

"Oh, why not?" Mal asked, sitting up. Ben slid off her shoulder and into the dirt with a smooth thud. He held up three fingers.

"One, you think I'm too strong for you when we're just sword fighting. No way you'll be able to take a fight like that. Two, I don't feel like throwing punches at my wife ever, even if it's so you can prove how Isle you are to me. Three, my parents would murder me." He peeked an eye open. "What's with you always picking fights?"

Mal shrugged. "I guess I always assumed Auradonians would be weaker than I am." Mal shrugged.

"Oh, we are." Ben nodded. "You're powerful. You're just not as strong as us."


"Well, you know what I meant." Ben shrugged. Mal hummed and laid down on the earth beside him. The pixies waved down at them from the treetops. Mal waved back and listened to the world around her. There was the beating of winged creatures overhead, the gentle thrumming of the river nearby, and beside her, Ben's breaths were going even.

Mal rolled over and poked him. "You going to sleep already?" She asked.

"You wear me out." Ben groaned, rubbing his face. "Can't a guy catch a break?"

"Hmm." Mal hummed, lying back down. Ben put his hands behind his head and they both continued examining the canopy.

"Tell me about the Isle," Ben said suddenly. "What was it like?"

Mal blinked and frowned. "Um, it was dark and polluted. Not much else lives there, besides us."

"What did you like to do?" Ben asked. This time, Mal pulled an affronted face.

"I don't really feel like talking about my kidhood, Ben." She told him. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just want to listen to you talk about something," Ben mumbled. She heard him take a long, slow breath. "You have any friends out there?"

Silence rested on the grove for a few seconds, and then Mal let out a breath. "Yeah, I guess." She nodded. "I didn't really think of them as friends until I came to Auradon and learned the concept, though. We were more like… in a gang together. Us four."

"Were you dating anyone on the Isle?" Ben yawned.

"No." Mal shook her head. "We didn't really… date much on the Isle. It was more like… gang activity."
Ben let out a laugh, and somehow that prompted Mal to smile and keep going. "Harry Hook and I had a brief fling when we were younger. I had a little tattoo on my finger that I later got Carlos to take off. We split when I started hanging with Jay and he went with this girl named Uma instead."

"Sounds like a player." Ben laughed.

"He… kind of was?" Mal shrugged. "I don't know. He's really just the follower type. He adored me, and now he adores Uma, but he's also kissed the son of Gaston once or twice, so I'm not really sure what to think of him." She shrugged. "It's kind of clear he's in love with Uma, but he does play around a bit."

"Charming." Ben yawned. Mal hummed in agreement and rolled over on her side.

"I've been thinking about this a lot, lately," Mal told him. "What do you think we'd be like if this curse didn't exist?"

Ben opened an eye with a deep frown. "You'd be on the Isle." He told her.

"I hope you'd have eventually done something to the Isle but go on." Mal prompted.

"I might have." Ben shrugged. "Maybe I would have brought over some villain kids or gone over to make things better. Maybe we would have met anyways."

"Do you think we'd be good friends, or what?" Mal continued her prodding.

Ben was silent as he moved his head from side to side in thought. "I don't know." He told her honestly. "I was trying to get out of being with Audrey when you came. I don't know if I'd still be doing that or not. I hope I'd have asked you out though since you're pretty great."

Mal examined him; the slope of his nose and his eyelashes as he started to fade back into sleep. "So, you think we'd be dating anyways?" She asked.

"I hope." Ben yawned. "You're nice to be around."

Mal swallowed and laid back down. She heard Ben move beside her. His hand landed on her shoulder and started searching for her hand. She moved her hand to take his, and they laid on the ground, staring at the sky together.

"Do you think we might fall in love?" He whispered.

Mal's mouth went dry. She shrugged. "I don't know if I can." She answered. "That's why I've been letting you lead. I'm just trying to support you. I don't know what love feels like."

Ben rolled onto his chest and, using the hand Mal wasn't holding onto, smoothed her hair back from her forehead and pressed a kiss to her hairline. The feeling was so comforting that Mal closed her eyes for a few seconds. "Me neither," Ben whispered.

Mal squeezed his hand. "You have your parents." She whispered. "Lumiere. Auradon. People loved you growing up."

"And yet I've never fallen in love before." Ben sighed. "I tried, with Audrey and a couple of other girls I dated. But I never did." He continued running his hand through her hair in short, soothing motions. He leaned down as she listened. "I feel something with you, though." He whispered.

Mal turned and stared at him. "Like… what?" She whispered.
Ben met her gaze. "I think you're strong." He whispered. "I think you're funny. I think you're beautiful."

"You think you're, what, starting to love me?" Mal murmured.

Ben nodded. "Yeah." He agreed. "I've never felt like this before."

Mal swallowed. "It's probably just who my mom is." She told him in a sarcastic tone. "You have a thing for the Isle."

Ben burst into laughter. "That may very well be a part of it." He rolled his eyes. "Maybe we can learn about love together."

Mal's breath fell short as she looked back up at him. She felt breathless, wild, and exhilarated. She watched the sunlight filter through the leaves and fall on his hair in beautiful golden colors. Ben threaded his fingers through her hair and leaned down. His lips hit hers in a quick kiss, and then he laid down beside her and continued running his fingers through her hair.

What was love? What did it mean? Mal was filled with a thrill and a sense of wonder. Someone loved her. Someone cared about her. Her breath hitched as Ben pulled her hair away from her ear. They laid together and watched the clouds pass behind the barrier and the trees until dusk fell, and Mal went straight to sleep.

On the day they left, Ben stood by the carriage as Mal spoke with as many of the moor creatures as she could at one time.

"I'll come back." She promised them. "I have to go and be the queen of the Isle of the Lost for a while now, and then I'll come back and be your queen for a while."

"When?" A fairy twittered loudly.

Mal turned to Ben for an answer. Everyone turned to him as well. Ben shrugged. "Mal, you can come back every other month. One month here, one month there." He suggested.

Mal brightened up. "That sounds great." She looked back at the creatures. "Hear that? One month away, and I'll come back next month. I promise I won't let you guys start to decay again."

"Will King Ben come back next time too?" A fae child asked.

Mal shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. He and I will have to talk about it."

Ben, personally, didn't know if it'd be a great idea to leave Auradon in the care of his parents for another month. He bit his cheek and made a mental note to mention it to Mal.

She said goodbye over and over. Fairies flittered in and out of her purple locks. Finally, though, she approached the carriage. As she climbed inside, one of the fae children burst into tears. "I hate Auradon!" They declared. "Queen Mal, please don't go back!" Mal frowned and waved goodbye sadly. Ben climbed into the carriage after her. The carriage began to move very slowly. As they flipped around and headed back down the path, Mal leaned out the window and called out goodbye in a dozen different languages. Finally, though, all was quiet, and she leaned back inside.

"Whew." She said.

Ben chuckled. "It never occurred to me before now... when did you get so good at all those
languages?" Ben asked.

Mal shrugged. "During my queenly blessing, I guess. The spirit of the moors, she said: 'Speak', and after that everything just made sense."

Ben blinked. "I seriously can't even understand how you make most of the sounds you do."

Mal shrugged. She leaned into Ben's touch. "Thank you for all of that, Ben. I feel like I learned a lot about myself."

"I'm glad," Ben said. "How much magic do you know now, do you think?"

"Not enough." Mal laughed. She held up a hand and watched with delight as green light spread from her fingertips. She'd learned so much from the fairies... she couldn't wait to share everything. She wondered what Belle and Adam would think. Her smile faded somewhat. After all, it was Belle and Adam who had placed the restrictions on magic in the first place.

"What are you thinking?" Ben asked.

Mal considered how to put her feelings into words. "I'm wondering what your parents will think of me learning magic and being the queen of the moors." She admitted.

Ben took her hand and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "Don't worry about it." He smiled. "It's high time this change is made."

They broke through the barrier and met the rising sun. It was much colder outside the moors than inside. Auradon was in November now. The leaves had all withered away and the nights brought frost creeping over the ground. The sky was a fainter blue. A chilly burst of wind came in through the window. Mal shivered through her clothes. Ben fished under the seat and came up with a blanket, which they wrapped around themselves for the ride back.

"It's almost time for the first snowfall," Ben said. "We better get you back to Auradon."

Mal had forgotten about snow. She'd forgotten about the pretty paper patterns and the exploding can of glitter. She smiled fondly.

"I promised you the first snowfall," Ben said, very serious. "And I'm not going to let you miss it."

Mal sighed. "I'm sure it will be as lovely as you described." She closed her eyes and curled into his side.

Chapter End Notes

--Obligatory Spoiler--
Belle continued half-watching Ben and Mal outside, and half unraveling lights. She swallowed, and finally decided to voice her thoughts.

"Adam." She started quietly. Adam hummed to let her know he'd heard her as he plugged in a new string of lights and began moving up on the tree. "What do you think of Mal?" She asked.

Adam thought for a few seconds. "She's a lovely girl. I didn't expect the daughter of
Maleficent to be so civilized and smart."

"She gets along well with Ben." Belle probed.

"That she does, luckily." Adam stuck his tongue out of his mouth as he strung the lights around a particularly misshaped branch. No tree was completely perfect, unfortunately. "I'd hate for them to be miserable as we get this whole mess sorted out." Adam paused, then asked: "I wonder if he'll go back to Audrey after all this?"

"No," Belle said immediately. "That ship has long since sunk. Thankfully. But… Adam-" She turned and faced him instead of the doorway. "Would it be so terribly bad if they stayed like this?"

Adam fumbled the lights and stared at his wife incredulously. "What are you saying?"

He asked.

"Well…" Belle fumbled over her words. "They work so well together, and it's clear they like each other a lot. Maybe give it a few more months and we can call it true love and-"

"Belle." Adam interrupted her. "This isn't a book. We all want a happy ending, but these are real people's lives. While Mal is a lovely girl, she's also a very free spirit. The idea of queendom doesn't appeal. She's taken it up out of fear of returning to her mother. If and when the spell is broken, and she is neither faced with the threat of returning to the Isle or being trapped here forever, who knows what she will do? It's not fair to imply that Ben and Mal will stay together when we have no idea what forever will look like in a few months. Fairy Godmother, while they haven't gotten far, is still working on unraveling that curse. She could break it in fifteen years, she could break it in two months. I like Mal, but the fact is she could leave just as easily as she came."

-From Chapter 12
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Ben and Mal return to Auradon. Mal finally discovers her old things from the Isle. She begins to rework the moorlands to small success and she and Ben make more snowflakes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The skies over Auradon were an ugly, chalky grey, and the air smelt like overcast and rot around the gardens, which had withered away and been cut back by the royal gardeners. Ben and Mal rode up to the front circle instead of out the secret way, but there were no protestors and no sign that they had ever been there the month before. Mal hoped it was because they had accepted her, not because they'd gotten cold or decided to wait until she returned. Lumiere was waiting for them. He quickly took their suitcases out. Mal took hers this time, Ben took one of his, and Lumiere took the last one as they all scurried away from the carriage and inside. No sooner had they reached the porch when a clap of thunder echoed outside, and a light rain started to pour from the heavens. As they shut the doors to the entryway, it turned into a horrific downpour.

The castle was drafty and seemed exhausted. If a building could be exhausted, that is. Exhausted and in a foul mood.

"Queen Belle and King Adam are in the living room together with the fire blazing. I can let them know you've arrived," Lumiere explained as Mal flipped the water out of her hair and Ben wiped his face off in his shirt.

"Thank you, Lumiere," Ben said. He shivered in his wet clothes. "How cold is it outside?" He asked.

"Only fifty-seven," Lumiere informed them. "Not cold enough to snow for at least another day or so. The temperature drops every night."

Ben grinned at Mal. "We made it just in time."

Mal listened to the clatter of the rain on the palace. It occurred to her it had never rained on the moors. She missed it already.

"You should get changed before you catch a cold," Lumiere said. "Let's get you up to your room." He began to wheel his suitcase to the stairs, and Mal and Ben followed.

Lumiere left the suitcase at the door and went to inform Belle and Adam that they'd arrived. Mal snagged her phone from where she'd left it plugged in on the nightstand. Ben fished a sweater out of his closet and found a pair of thick socks. Mal stood in front of her own wardrobe for a few seconds before she started to look for a not-wet outfit of her own. It was clear that Belle and Sophia had been at work while she was gone. They'd found her tons of new clothes and organized everything. To her immediate right were four ballgowns for special occasions, followed by less dressy but still nice dresses. There were dressy skirts and blouses paired up beside each other, and
then a shoe hanger gave Mal the option between five different types of heels. On the other side of the closet was a much denser casual-wear area. Long-sleeved to sleeve-less shirts in various shades of purple, black, white, grey and green, pants and shorts of various types, warm overcoats and fuzzy sweaters, converse shoes and slip-ons for when the weather turned warm again. And to top it all off, her old Isle clothes were hanging beside the rest, finally here. However, Mal thought as she ran a finger down a pair of extremely thick pants, they seemed much too small now.

Mal snickered as she pulled out an ugly purple sweater with fuzzy bobbles on it and found a pair of socks that were knee-high and seemed to be made of fuzzy white fur. She pulled on a pair of leggings and then pulled the socks on over them. Then, she turned and leaned against the doorframe to the closet until Ben finished shoving his feet into a pair of slippers and looked up at her.

"Ugh!" He complained upon glimpsing her outfit. "You're burning my eyes out."

Mal chuckled and strode across the room to where Ben was looking at the ceiling with a playful smile. She stood on her tip-toes and put her arms around his neck. "About time I did something this evil, huh?" She laughed and gave him a quick peck.

Ben laughed and put his arm around her shoulders. "Let's go talk to my parents." He said, leading her to the door and out into the hall. They began to wander down the corridors as Ben continued to make jibes at her choice of apparel. "Maybe Sophia will be there too, and we can complain about how awful your fashion sense is."

"Sophia will agree with me and say I look great." Mal smiled.

Ben shook his head and made a noise of disagreement. "You look great, but your clothes do not. We'll have to start a palace petition to take that sweater away from you."

Mal pursed her lips and eyed Ben with a completely serious expression. "If you do that, I will find a way to spell all of your suits to look like this."

Ben immediately held up his hands in sub-session. "Fine, fine." He elbowed her. "Whatever makes her highness happy."

Mal's smile stretched a little thin. "Even though I'm technically Queen of two lands, that is still such an odd sentiment."

"I think it's fitting." Ben disagreed, holding a hand to the top of her head before pretending to compare their heights. Mal swatted his hand away from her with a frown, and he burst into laughter. "Should we come up with something different?" He teased. "Regina?"

"What?" Mal asked. She'd never even heard that word before in her life.

"It's queen in Latin." Ben crossed his arms with a smirk as he explained.

"Nah," Mal said. "I'll just go by Mal."

"Her ladyship?" Ben tried.

"Nah. Just Mal." Mal rolled her eyes and turned away from him. Ben opened the door to the living room with a chuckle. Mal slipped under his arm and inside.

The living room was a cozy area with bookcases and a painting of Ben's grandfather, the father of the Beast. It had deep red, plushy couches and squishy maroon carpet leading up to a balcony.
where it was white-tiled. A furnace in front of the couches kept the room nice and toasty, and a basket beside the couches was filled with many blankets. Belle and Adam were sitting on a couch together, reading a book titled: Twice in a Lifetime.

"There you are," Belle said with a smile as she saw Mal walk in with Ben following her. Mal sat down on a couch and pulled out her phone with a small wave.

"What are you wearing?" Adam rolled his eyes upon seeing Mal's outfit.

"I know, dad." Ben sighed dramatically. He gave his mom a quick kiss on the cheek and sat down beside Mal. "I know."

Mal clicked her tongue and elbowed Ben playfully.

"It's nice to have you back," Belle said with a smile as she pulled a maroon blanket tighter around her legs.

"Nice to be back." Ben smiled. He took Mal's hand and leaned his head back. Belle cocked her head to one side as Mal let Ben keep her hand and continued thumbing through her phone with one hand. The older queen seemed fascinated by Ben and Mal's careless ease around each other.

Mal scoffed. She turned her body and put her legs across Ben's lap as she pulled up the castle homepage and laid her head on the armrest of the couch. Their hands remained linked together. "I dunno. I liked the moors an awful lot. I might have to start playing favorites."

"About the moors," Adam cleared his throat. "Apparently there was a color change to the barrier, and Princess Audrey had an awful lot to say on social media about you. How much is true?"

Mal leaned her head back to meet Adam's lazy gaze. "How do you expect us to know?" She asked with a sweet smile. "We were just gone for an entire month."

Ben chuckled. He poked her arm. "Stop playing." He told her. "You don't have to be so silly all of the sudden." But really, she couldn't help it. Something about the moors, about her funny clothes, and about Ben had her smiling, and she just couldn't put her finger on this new feeling in her chest.

Mal chuckled and swung her legs off of Ben's. "I'm still working through the details." She told Ben's parents as she leaned her head against his shoulder. "But the spirit of the moors woke and manifested herself to me. She begged me to take reins, I did, I renewed the moors to their former glory, Aurora dropped by and gave me her blessing, and now I'm the queen of the moors and Ben is honorary King."

Belle's eyebrows crept higher and higher. "Fascinating." She exhaled finally. "Are the moors open to Auradon as of right now?"

"Not yet," Mal informed her. "The moors haven't been exposed to outsiders in like, thirty years. They knew Aurora, and now Ben. Not as much Audrey. I'm going to give them time to recover from the renewal before I ask them to decide how okay they are with visitors." She hesitated. "But for the record, lots of people hate Auradon. It's not just the Isle anymore. You guys made lots of enemies in your war."

Belle and Adam's faces faded into sadness. They exchanged a look, and Adam grumbled softly. "That's wise of you." Adam nodded his approval. It was clear, though, that he was uncomfortable with the revelation.

Ben tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch. "She has to go back every other month to make
sure they're okay." He announced. The question was clear in his voice.

Adam blinked. He and Belle turned to face each other, and then Belle went back to her book. Adam straightened up. "Belle and I are old." He told Ben. "One month we could do for your honeymoon, but it's your responsibility to rule, not ours. Believe it or not, we'd like to retire." Belle chuckled at his words.

Ben nodded gravely. "I understand." He affirmed. He looked at Mal. "We can arrange for safe transport, but my kingdom needs me as much as yours does." He told her.

Mal gave him a double thumbs-up. "Sounds good." She agreed. "Glad that's decided." She reached for her cell phone, fully intending to be updated on what had been happening while she was away. Belle watched her over the tops of the pages.

"You better let everyone know what's true and what's not about Audrey's claims." She told Mal as Mal unlocked her phone.

"Got it," Mal affirmed. She skimmed the recent news section, found nothing of interest, and went to her personal page. Her experimental photo was still up there. She got up, walked around the couch and took a photo of Ben with the glowing furnace behind him as Belle and Adam delved into their book together. As she walked back around, she captioned it: "Just got home from the moors. Moors have been renewed and there was a crown change. They are not part of Auradon. I will be returning every other month to assist in that kingdom. Thanks, sleepingaurora for your support. As a daughter of the enemy, it means more than you know." Once posted, she turned her phone off and looked up at Ben. "I just announced it."

"Mhm?" He asked, still leaning his head back with his eyes closed.

"Care to make a wager?" She asked with a smirk.

The room came to life. Belle snapped her book shut. "Five minutes." She said, glaring at Adam.

"Twelve." He barked, picking up a bookmark from a side table. He handed it to Belle, who quickly re-found the page they'd been on and sheepishly replaced the bookmark there.

Mal looked at Ben as she pulled up the stopwatch app on her phone. he switched the hand he was holding hers with and began trailing his fingers through her hair in a soothing motion that made her want to close her eyes. "I say eight, how about you?" She yawned.

"Fifteen." He decided as the fire popped and crackled in front of them. "It's a Sunday, guys. And the palace has been silent for a month. Definitely fifteen."

"I never asked," Mal chuckled as she started the stopwatch. "What happens if you're all wrong?"

"We all loose and Lumiere laughs at us." Ben nodded. Belle let out a laugh and reopened hers and Adam's book. Ben let her have her hand back and pulled his phone out, presumably so he could check his own social media.

Mal chuckled at the answer and set the phone in her lap as she watched the fire burn. Ben's fingers continued rubbing small circles into her scalp. It was the small motions that made her feel like she was melting into the couch beside him.

"How was your trip, by the way?" Belle asked.

"Oh!" Ben clicked the phone screen off. "I have to tell you about everything. The moorlands are
full of creatures and people - there's fae folk with lizard skin and feathers and some have wings while others don't... it's amazing. And there's fruit that grows as jewels on trees and if you don't eat it off the tree quick enough, it'll harden into gems and then it'll turn back into magic. It's almost never dark because so many of the things there have bioluminescence. There's fish that swim in the air, the trees have lit veins, and not to mention the barrier."

"Were there any language barriers?" Belle asked curiously. Ben let out a colossal groan and dissolved into a rant about how few of the creatures spoke English. Mal's eyes grew heavy. As Ben regaled his mom with tales of glowing trees and jeweled fruit, she curled into his shoulder and drifted away.

Later, she was told that Ben won by two minutes and forty-nine seconds.

"I can't find any tennis shoes," Mal complained as she pulled a long pair of leather boots out of the back of her closet and set them beside a collection of heels, sandals, flip-flops, other boots, and slippers. "They're just not here."

She heard Ben sigh from where he was getting ready in his own closet and heard his heavy footfalls as he walked towards her. She looked up with a frown as he appeared in the doorway, still clipping a cuff link onto his right sleeve. "I have a video conference in twenty minutes with Naveen and Tiana from New Orleans, but I'll try and help." he sighed as he rolled his sleeve down and frowned at the pile beside her. "Why tennis shoes?" He asked. "Can't you wear any of these?"

Mal shrugged as she glared at the pile. Ben sighed. He got to his knees and pushed aside a rack of jeans to see if he would have any luck. Mal began looking beside him. As she pushed back a rack of sweaters, she caught a glimpse of something that wasn't new. She pulled it out with a frown and immediately her expression gave way to shock. "Oh!" She exclaimed. It was her suitcase from the Isle. A smile spread across her cheeks as she ran her hand over the warm leather.

Ben raised an eyebrow at it. "Did you just now get that back?" He asked. "They should have given it to you months ago."

Mal shrugged as she laid it out of the floor and hummed as she ran her fingers across the mottled spray paint marks covering the leather. "I guess they wanted to keep it just in case there was something wrong with it they couldn't find." She tugged the zipper back and lifted the lid to examine the interior. All of her clothes were still inside, though they were no longer folded in the neat stacks like they usually were kept on the Isle, meaning either Maleficent had packed her things for her or the palace had been rummaging.

Ben reached over her arm and picked out three tiny pieces of square paper that were tucked into the side of the bag. They were about the size of postcards. One was noticeably dirtier than the others. He held them in view of her and read the surface contents of the first out loud. "This is a notice that this bag was searched by the Royal Palace Protection Services(RPPS). Items may have been removed or broken as we worked to protect our royal family." He sighed. Scribbled across the bottom of the card was a number with a notice they could call to get a detailed report of the findings. Ben shuffled the cards around. "This bag was cleared by Stewart Atticus on October twenty-ninth. Formal statement: We all know she didn't bring anything, so we might as well let her have her stuff." Mal snorted, and then Ben held the last card, the dirtier one, to her. "That one's probably not for me." He reasoned.

Mal took the card and skimmed its contents. "Make mama proud, pumpkin." One sentence read. Then, beneath it in beautiful, smaller handwriting: "Mal, don't panic. The palace will figure this out. After all, there's no way they'll actually force you to marry the crown prince of Auradon."
You'll be home with us soon enough and this will all be a bad dream." Without a word, Mal handed the card back to Ben, who read it hesitantly. His face contorted into a painful grimace.

Mal pulled out a thick jacket and held it up. The pockets had been turned inside out and searched through. A white tag indicated that it had been found clean. She glanced into the suitcase and a smile spread across her face. "Perfect!" She pronounced, pulling out a pair of lace-up tennis shoes with black dragon wings appliques sewn onto the sides. She pulled one onto her feet and immediately her smile faded. She couldn't get her heel into it, and her foot was being horrifically squeezed from all angles. "Never mind." She sighed. "I don't remember these being that tight." She set the shoes aside.

"There's another pair in here," Ben told her, pulled out a pair of boots. As the purple paint-splattered shoes came into view, both of their mouths dropped open. The thick soles had been horrifically mutilated. They were slashed up the length of the sides and had clearly been searched through to the inside of the rubber sole.

"Did they think I was hiding things inside of the sole?" Mal asked in disbelief. She began to pull more and more items out. There wasn't much more, and only a couple other items had been maimed. A different thick jacket had the pockets slashed open and the interior of the coat had been searched, and a shirt with a longer neck hemline had had the seam split to make sure nothing was hidden inside. Mal was impressed with the lengths the castle went to find things.

"Who wrote this?" Ben asked, still holding the card from the Isle.

"Evie," Mal responded. "She was my best friend." "She made all these things. The suitcase too." She ran a hand over the leather as she chewed on her cheek.

Ben got off his knees and crossed his legs. He cleared his throat and then began: "She's talented. You must miss her."

Mal made a face. "My entire life was over there with my friends. Of course, I miss them. I'm not... heartless." She scowled.

"Do you miss your mom?" Ben asked.

Mal's shoulders slumped. "I don't know." She sighed. "I think I more miss the idea of my mom than my actual mom. After all, she didn't particularly look after me." She sighed and zipped up her old suitcase. "That's too many memories." She decided.

Ben frowned at her words. "Too many memories?" He asked.

Mal nodded. "I don't really have time to be sad." She explained. "After all, we have kingdoms we need to run." She lifted the suitcase back into its place.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ben asked.

Mal's nose crinkled. "What's there to talk about?" She asked. "It's in the past. I'm ahead of it now."

"How far ahead?" Ben raised an eyebrow. Mal sighed and clasped her hands in her lap. She could feel the world slowing down around her. Maybe it had been a few months, but things had been moving so fast that sometimes it felt like yesterday. There were at least a million thoughts tuck in her head. She wasn't sure if it was a good thing her heart was listening, or if she should be putting a stop to the emotions meddling with her worries. She swallowed.

"I don't know yet." She admitted. "It still feels like something is missing. I'm just..." She pursed her
"Not sure where I should be going to look."

"Well, what do you feel like you should be doing?" Ben asked.

"Getting to my office." Mal sighed, then paused to consider his words. "I don't even know what my heart is telling me. It feels like I'm wandering through a dream and there are signs directing me, but I can't read them. This entire time, I've really just been trying to put one foot in front of the other, walking the line, you know?"

"Me too." Ben agreed with a sigh. "It's cool though. In hindsight, I feel like we've both come a long way."

Mal nodded in agreement. Every hour, it seemed, she could feel change hard at work on her. Every step, every word; with every passing hour, even. She was something new, something brave, something she'd never been before. It was incredible to watch.

Ben got back to his knees and put his arms around Mal's shoulders. She closed her eyes and took a small breath as he pressed a kiss to her hair and then stood up. His expression darkened a bit as he glared at a corner of the closet. She watched as he stooped down and picked up a pair of purple-laced black tennis shoes from where they'd been hidden on the other side of the closet behind a few skirts Sophia had hung. Mal groaned as he handed them to her wordlessly.

"Kay." He cleared his throat. "I have to go now, or I won't be there to take that video call. See you later?"

Mal nodded with a small smile. "Yeah. I'm going to put these back and then I'll be in my office. Have a good day."

"Bye." Ben bid her farewell. He gave her another quick, warm hug and then headed out into the bedroom and towards the hallway. Mal pulled on the new shoes and began to put the others back in their places. She wasn't quite sure what to do with the ruined clothes from the Isle, so she left them in a little stack by the door, intending to do something with them later. It occurred to her that all of her shirts and pants were too short, too tight. She wished she had something besides her oversized Isle jacket to wear, but alas Evie hadn't made very many things large when she'd known she could just adjust them later. The jacket had been a special case with all of its hidden pockets and thick panels because it would have been harder to rip that apart. Now, it was one of Mal's only physical connections to her old life.

She combed her hair and turned out the lights in all the rooms as she took a deep breath and headed down to her waiting office.

Protesters against her returned early that morning. They stayed until sundown, giving speeches to each other and demanding a meeting with the king, who politely refused as he took video calls from everyone who hadn't been able to speak with him the last month and caught up on everything that had happened in Auradon. Mal quickly found out that running a kingdom was definitely not all that it was cracked up to be, and she had greater, growing respect for Adam and Belle, who'd managed to unite dozens of kingdoms and create a government. Now, she was essentially trying to do the same thing on a much, much smaller scale. She was glad she'd done all her work on dividing the Isle before she'd left with Ben on their honeymoon because that told her where to start.

Using her foreknowledge of the years, she proposed approximately three dozen acts to Ben over the first week of them being back from the moors. She was quickly finding that Ben was not only her husband, but her advisor, partner, and friend. While the Isle was, technically, on its own, she
and Ben worked closely for the better of her people without the hindering of his. They arranged for better food and supply shipments together as Mal started to instigate changes, and he helped her find architects to make the Isle more livable. Auradon already had systems that would help correct pollution, but the game-changer was the moorish people. Mal planned to bring a number of people and creatures native to the Moors to the Isle, where they would be able to help naturally alleviate pollution in the areas she had selected for building and help heal plant and animal life there.

Step one would be to create a safe place where people could escape poisonous situations. She needed to create a divide between the people who had grown sick of corruption and violence and the villains who wanted to live off of everyone else's efforts. Therefore, a second barrier became necessary. The original barrier would be modified to envelope most of the Isle while a newer barrier would encase the new parts. Mal wanted it to be on a beach where it would be possible to put a wharf or a dock so that ships could travel from Auradon to the Isle with ease. And since the villains of the golden age would take over if she built new buildings, she debated ideas with an architect Ben recommended, and together they came up with the idea of a small utopia built in the current forest area, with walls to keep others out with the barrier protecting the walls and the people inside. The new barrier would be structured differently than the first. It would keep outside forces without permission out and keep all villains inside, though she extended the barrier into the ocean to allow the people to work with the ocean.

Step two: She needed to help the Isle find a way to sustain itself. The Isle wasn't impossibly small, but it didn't have the vast capacity of resources that Auradon did. It was about a fifth or sixth the size of Auradon, but pollution-corrupted and overrun with baddies. Fixing the barrier would allow the clouds to clear and circulate around her city and the Moorish people would help heal the land so they could plant things, but the problem would be finding a way to pay Auradon back for all the debt she was going to plunge the Isle into. The fewer things she used from Auradon and the more she could get the people involved, the better it would be in the long run, but she had to have a believable plan first.

Step three: She needed an iron-clad system that would prevent stealing, violence, or manipulation, as much as possible. After all, the higher-up villains could hardly be counted on to not force everyone to work for them in the new place, and then she'd be back in the same place she was now. So she came up with the idea of a magic card with a point system that was connected to it. Every person had to have a card to use doors, enter the city, purchase anything, or even have the right to their possessions. If you didn't have a card, you couldn't live there and, without permission from the queen, the barrier would eject you outside the doors. The card couldn't be stolen as it would return to the owner, disappeared when someone died, and had to be issued from her. That was the only downside. She would have to issue every card personally, to however many people the Isle contained. Auradon didn't know it, but the Isle's population had spread out and expanded across the Isle as time went on. Mal knew that, compared to Auradon's listed 507 villains and the 723 recorded children, the Isle could easily have two or three thousand people living there. The records, unfortunately, were messy. People had been sent sporadically to the Isle during the early years, and many had died and never been recorded, and not to mention the nonexistent birth records from the last eight years alone.

She picked a large area of forest that extended into a broken bay area on the center strip of the Isle. There was a small, sandy beach of pebbles that was currently too dangerous to walk on. There was a string of broken rocks near the edge of the pier that she would use magic to remove before putting a wharf in, and the land was mostly flat, which was good for the types of utopia she wanted to raise up. Since it was uninhabited, no one's current homes would be lost to the construction efforts. They could build apartment complexes which remained constantly locked until opened with one's card for small families and single-member groups. For larger families, there could be a set of suburban-type houses with the same locking system. For the first few homes, only standard-
type houses would be built in the same style and type as everyone else's. Once they got it up and running, they could gradually expand the community into the parts of the Isle that were currently inhabited and hopefully would become desolate as people abandoned in favor of the new opportunities. Islanders could start small businesses, just as they had on the Isle, and with a slightly steeper rent, Mal could start to pay Ben's country back for the kickstart he was giving her now. As the economy grew, things would change, and maybe there would come a day that the Isle was in a place to trade with Auradon.

Organization and discipline was key. To solve the biggest problem of the villains trying to screw up all her hard work, she decided that people who wished to live in the Utopia would have to agree to live without sabotage and evil. A magical oath would ensure it. They would be assigned a home based on the size of their group and agree to work to help upkeep the city. This would prevent homelessness and help keep unemployment rates low. Hopefully, with time, effort, and hope, farms would start. Stores would open, schools would teach, businesses would deal, and the Isle people would evolve. Eventually, they'd build their own homes that would not be cookie-cutters of each other, and new children would be born in a safe-heaven where villainy was not taught as an exclusive course.

It seemed like a dream, to be honest. She saw quite plainly how Belle and Adam had first exchanged looks when she first started bouncing ideas off of them. In fact, Ben had told shook his head and told her no outright, forcing her to retreat to come up with more small plans on how to run things. At every meal, they discussed and debated how to run things. How would the city receive water? Sewage? Electricity? At last, Mal, Ben, and the architect had signed a document, and Auradon began sending raw goods to the Isle to start construction. Mal went to the Isle for the first time in months to guide ships into the area she had determined and to outline the area she wanted to work with. An Auradonian crew went over with her as well as a small squad of the army to protect them. They were instructed to defend against hostiles but remain open and friendly to young islanders who might want to learn the construction trade. None of the Islanders came to see them begin work as they began to clear the area of the forest closest to the beach and work backwards into the land, but on the second day, after Mal was gone, small teens and children began looking around the area. It was a risky gamble, and Mal called the architect every night to see how the formation of the walls was coming along. Meanwhile, she set to her next order of business.

They were at a creeping standstill until the architect informed her one night of good news: fourteen children between the ages of ten and twenty had begun to frequent the site and help the workers out of curiosity. They were quickly learning, and the building was moving even faster. Enough of the land was cleared to dig the foundation for the first building. The builders had gifted their protege's clothes and food, and word had spread to the other islanders what was going on. The group was growing every day. Mal asked him to take the names and hours of those who worked, and promised she'd see them paid for their efforts.

Since Mal was technically inventing a new currency aside from Isle notes and Auradon dollars, she also had to consider how to add money into the economy. She decided her federal estate could hold the 'digitized' money not in use and pay anyone who worked federally, which would be everyone for a little while. Once people got enough money to try and start their own businesses, there'd be a better shift and flow of money changing hands. She wasn't going to do paper money for a long time, if ever. It was too easy to steal and too hard to keep track of.

The building of the walls went fast with the islanders helping, but all too soon the end of Mal's first month as queen was approaching, and she had to return to the moors to help them. Since Ben had his own kingdom to rule, she gave the architect permission to work without her advising for a month, but only to the points they had discussed. If a problem arose, he had the final call on whether to wait for her return to discuss it or to continue in spite of tribulation. Mal would return
with a few people and creatures from the moors to help her clear pollution out of the area.

Meanwhile, Auradon remained mercurial. Many of the kingdoms were waiting out for the ride to see what would happen, but others had risen up into protests upon seeing her. Mal supposed it had something to do with the fact she didn't look Auradonian. So far, Cinderellasburg, Agrabah, Tangletown, Weasletown and the Summerlands had risen up at least in part to protest her ascension to the throne, though they were mostly placated by the fact she couldn't do anything. Mal knew though, that if Ben were to suddenly fall ill for any reason, there'd be an uprising.

At the end of a long day of work drafting, planning, writing and revising, Mal hauled herself, not to her and Ben's room, but to Ben's office. Inside, Ben was hard at work. He was trying to write a law regarding commercial boats who were trying to drive over to the Isle of the Lost to see how the construction was going. It was time to lay down some rules on the division of waters.

He didn't look up when she walked in but said: "Hey Mal," as he ran his hands through his hair irritably.

Mal scrunched her eyebrows together as her shoulders slumped to the ground. "I know I walk in here a lot, but how'd you know it was me?" She asked.

Ben still didn't tear his gaze from the screen. "I glimpsed your hair." He said. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I don't get it. Just because there's construction on the Isle doesn't mean they should run over all the time! Two people got stuck in the barrier in the last week, and they're messing up the path of the supply barges!" He groaned and began to furiously type.

Mal walked over to Ben and slumped down on the opposite side of the desk. Ben finally looked away from his work and down at her. He blinked several times. "Mal?" He asked.

He pushed the wheelie seat away from the computer and sat down by her. "Feeling overwhelmed?" He asked.

Mal groaned. Ben took her hands and pulled her into his grasp. She leaned her head on his shoulder. "This is all dumb." She growled. "I'm so tired of batting the same problems back and forth." She closed her eyes and put her arms around his neck and continued mumbling. "I don't know. I spent all day bouncing ideas off the stupid wall, and we haven't talked outside of work a lot lately. I guess I miss you." She sighed. "I kind of didn't expect running a kingdom to be, like, this hard." She muttered.

Ben laughed and let her go so he could crane his neck to look at the clock. "What time is it?" He asked.

"Late," Mal grumbled.

"Seven." Ben read the time off the computer. "You're right. Time to quit. Have you had dinner?"

"Yeah." Mal sighed. "Sophia brought me some."

"Lumiere brought me some too," Ben admitted. He wheeled them toward the computer and saved his half-written statement. "Let's do something." He said. "Something together."

"Like what?" Mal asked with a raised eyebrow. The idea of something strenuous didn't really appear. She'd honestly be happy to get a proper hug from Ben, have a quick shower, and go to bed.

Ben sighed and looked out the window. "I wish it would snow." He moaned. We could sit in the living room and drink hot chocolate and watch the snow. But you leave in like, a week, and
nothing." He glared like the sky was offending him.

Mal blinked and straightened up. She stood up and went to the printer. She pulled out a thick wad of paper. "Come on Prince Boy." She said as she held out a hand and hauled Ben to his feet. "Let's go make snow."

Ben smirked as he caught her drift and grabbed scissors as he walked out of the room.

There wasn't any glitter spray, but they still taped all their creations up around the living room. Ben and Mal stayed by the furnace, which was off, and wrapped themselves up in squashy blankets as they cut. A giant pile of paper pieces formed on the floor, which Mal moved to the furnace with an experimental spell for when they next set it ablaze. Snowflakes began to cover the room. All four walls had snowflakes, and it was snowing inside the frame of the painting of Ben's grandfather. The windows grew thick with pretty paper patterns, and the door became a winter wonderland of flakes. With every paper design that went up, Mal grew more and more excited.

She leaned her back against Ben's shoulder as she carved small, triangular pieces out of her new design. "Do you think it'll snow tomorrow?" She asked Ben.

"I hope so," Ben answered. "My phones said it's supposed to have snowed the last two weeks, but the weather is just holding out on us." He carved out the center of a snowflake and unfolded it to show her. She smiled brightly at the elegant arches of the paper.

Ben sighed and put an arm around her as she carefully cut around the design she was making. "We should do this more often" He whispered. "I missed you."

Mal took her eyes off her work for a quick second to smile up at him. "I missed you too." She replied. She missed being in the moors and talking to him all the time. He leaned down and gave her what was meant to be a quick kiss. Before he could lean back up, Mal put an arm around his neck to keep him from moving away and continued kissing him. He chuckled and moved so he wouldn't hurt her neck.

Someone knocked on the open door. Mal let go of Ben's head as both monarchs looked up to see King Adam in the doorway, casting a long shadow that ended at their feet. He peered around. "Looks like you've been busy." He told them casually. Mal spaced herself from Ben by a few inches as Adam walked into the room and sat in an armchair near the door. She picked up her scissors without a word as red tinged her cheeks.

"You do remember what your mother and I spoke to you about, yes?" Adam asked casually. He focused particularly on Ben.

"Which thing are you referring to?" Ben asked casually. He turned to face his dad head-on. Mal returned to leaning on his shoulder.

"About you and Mal. After you married." Adam clarified. "What I want to say is… we don't know how long it may take to break the curse, as they are still trying. So far, almost no progress has been made. Are you and Mal taking proper precautions for the chance she might get pregnant before the curse is broken, or does that not matter much to you anymore?"

Mal turned a little pink and pointedly focused on her project. She hated all this insinuation. Of course, as queen and king, the duty fell to her and Ben to one day have a kid if the spell was never broken, but she really didn't want to even consider what that would look like. What a mess.

Ben shook his head. "Dad, Mal's still a teenager. She won't be seventeen for another two months, in
January. It's still technically illegal for her to have a kid with me since I'm still so many years older than her. She and I already talked, and we agreed it wasn't a good idea. I'm young, she's younger, and it's not safe. We haven't done anything of the sort.” Ben's hand moved on the floor in the corner of Mal's vision, so she put her hand down next to his so that he could give it a quick squeeze.

"At all?" King Adam asked.

"Nada," Ben confirmed. "Neither of us are quite… there, yet." Mal nodded along with his words as he talked. She set the scissors down and unfolded her creation.

"Viola." She announced, showing it to Ben. Long lines had been etched around the perimeter of the flake with painstakingly elaborate rose etchings cut out of the longer sides. Ben whistled in appreciation as she picked up his latest creation along with hers and stood to find a wall space to tape them up.

There almost wasn't any.

Mal examined the walls while biting her cheek. "You'll have to tape them up on the ceiling," Ben told her from the floor with a laugh. "We should probably call it quits after that and go get some sleep."

She nodded in silence and pulled off a few pieces of tape.

"Can you reach?" King Adam asked.

Mal put the tape on the corners of the snowflakes and set them on the floor. She snapped her fingers at them, and they floated up at a brisk rate before attaching themselves to the ceiling. She turned with a goofy smile to the two men in the room. Ben was looking at her with a smile, but Adam looked like he'd swallowed a plum whole. Mal's smile faded.

"Mal." Adam choked out. "You are aware there are restrictions on magic in Auradon, yes?"

Ben turned to his father. "Not for long, probably. I don't think it's right that magical people aren't able to express their talents. Poor Jane can't control her magic and it gives her a lot of mental stress. We should have better options for magical people. It worked well enough in Harry Potter."

"Okay." Adam held up a hand. "One, Harry Potter is fictional. Two, everyone was magical in Harry Potter. Here, in Auradon, it's unfair for some people to have the advantage of magic while others do not."

Ben was silent, twiddling his thumbs. Then, he met his dad's eyes and asked: "Have you ever read Harrison Bergeron, dad?"

Adam crinkled his forehead in thought. "I… can't say I have."

"It's the story where people weren't allowed to be smarter, kinder, better looking, or more physically able than everyone else. They had to wear handicaps to be equal? And since it was harder to make dumb people smarter and not-so-good-looking people pretty, they made everyone hide their faces and wear mental handicaps that didn't allow them to be smart?" Ben probed.

"Now, see here-" Adam tried to interrupt, seeing where this was going.

"We're different, dad. I think it's great that Mal has this talent. I have talents she doesn't. She can't play tourney or ballroom dance and I think I trump her in political speaking though she's getting
better fast. The way you've gone about making it 'equal' for everyone, people are afraid of magic. That's wrong.' Ben folded his arms and turned to smile at Mal, who felt very awkward listening to their conversation. He stood up and fluffed out the blanket before folding it as Mal gathered up the remaining pieces of paper and put them into the furnace. She took a few photos of the room and its snowflakes, including the ones on the ceiling, before she took Ben's hand and walked with him up to their room. Neither she nor Ben or Adam said a thing to each other in the aftermath.

"Thanks for standing up to him," Mal whispered as they walked inside and started getting ready for bed.

"Mal, I was only standing up for what I believe." Ben rolled his eyes as he tossed unneeded decorative pillows onto the floor. "And really, I believe in you."

Mal smiled as a red tone tinged her cheeks. "No one's ever really believed in me like you do." She said.

"Just you wait," Ben promised. "Everyone will believe in you. You're going to change history as we know it." He spread his arms toward the ceiling with a broad smile.

After they'd gotten dressed for bed and brushed their teeth, Mal took out her phone and uploaded the pictures onto the castle website. The statement read: "We ran out of room! Ben and I ended up putting snowflakes on the ceiling. He's really good to me. I trust him like family. He makes me laugh and is open to how I'm feeling and what I need in life."

Other posts detailed things like what her plans were for the Isle of the lost, along with pictures of daily castle life – breakfast with Belle, Adam, and Ben, a selfie of her and Sophia, the early sunrise from her window, among other things. Mal's page was popular among the citizens because it showed something the other pages didn't – what royal life was like. A lot of middle-class people kept commenting on how strange it was that they didn't do anything out of the ordinary – that Mal still talked with her in-laws and played board games with her best friend. One of her most popular posts was a picture of the top of Mal's head before she'd brushed her hair, with her green eyes crossed playfully at the camera. It was captioned: "When your husband thinks you should wear a dress to the meeting with the architect, but you want to wear pajamas and a comforter." The subsequent photo showed her mid-eye-roll, captioned: "He won, and I wore the dress."

As she climbed into bed, she noticed Ben was on his phone too. He chuckled. "What is it?" She asked.

"You." He answered.

"Me." She nodded knowledgeably.

He turned the phone around. People had started commenting on her photo. At the top of the screen was Doug, who'd written: "BEHOLD, The Amenities of Royal Life." She chuckled as he plugged in his phone and turned the lights down. She felt the mattress shift with his weight, and then a hand landed in the center of the bed. She smiled in the dark and clasped his hand tightly.

"Goodnight." She heard his whisper from across the sheets.

"Night." She said but didn't withdraw her hand. Five minutes later, her eyes shut, and she slept.

Chapter End Notes
I do not own Descendants, Beauty and the Beast (1991 or 2017), Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, the Princess and the Frog, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Harry Potter (Warner Brothers and JK Rowling), or Harrison Bergeron (Kurt Vonnegut).
Mal massaged her knuckles, wincing in pain every time she applied pressure to a particularly sore area. It was seven at night, and her day had been filled with lots and lots of paperwork as she documented and arranged things for the Isle.

She pushed open the door to her and Ben's room and discovered Sophia setting a long bag on the couch with a smile. Mal paused in the doorway as Sophia turned around. "What's that?" Mal asked.

"From Belle." Sophia smiled. "It's a gift. She thought you might want something pretty and warm."

"It's a dress?" Mal frowned.

"Yes, but don't knock it before you try it." Sophia told her. "I know it's not ripped jeans and combat boots, but I think you should give it a shot." She picked the heavy bag back up off of the couch and handed it to Mal, who gave a half-hearted sigh. She glanced towards the bedroom, and noticed the door was closed. "Is Ben inside?" She asked, walking towards the door.

"No." Sophia shook her head. "He left a few minutes ago."

"To go where?" Mal asked with her frown deepening, twisting the knob and glancing inside. It was predictably empty. She thought for a second but couldn't remember if Ben had told her he was going anywhere this evening. He didn't usually.

"Everyone's gathering in the family room." Sophia told her with a smile. "They think it might snow."

Mal blinked. "Oh." She hummed. She glanced down at the large, heavy bag in her hands. "Should I wait to try this on and just head down?"

"You could wear it down." Sophia suggested. "Ben actually came up just to get changed before he went down."

"What kind of dress is this?" Mal asked, shaking the bag a little to get a feel for where the fabric was. It was long. "Unless Ben got dressed in a suit with cufflinks and the entire get-up, I doubt we'll match."

"It's not as fancy as you think." Sophia rolled her eyes. "Belle knows better than to get you a ballgown. It's just a warm dress. Try it on." She reached for the door handle and tugged it closed in front of Mal, who sighed and unzipped the dress bag. Inside was a mess of velvet. The dress was a deep brown-red mix with long, warm sleeves. The heavy velvet skirt swished around her calves. It was double sided, sewn in a giant loop that made the dress pleat in a very feminine way. She slipped it on and then fiddled with the seams until it fell down the way it was supposed to. She
tried to reach the zipper and found it entirely out of her reach, so she swallowed and held the back closed as she stepped back out of the room.

The skirts brushed against her legs in a tickling sort of feeling and Mal swayed from side to side to feel the comfortable, almost cool weight shift from side to side. She hadn't liked it first seeing it, but now that it was on, she felt nice. Not hideous. Not even close.

"Need me to zip you up?" Sophia chuckled, walking out of the bathroom with a brush and some hair ties.

"Yes please." Mal smiled and moved her hair out of the way as Sophia approached and dragged the zipper up the length of her dress. She went back to massaging her fingers as Sophia smoothed down the fabric around her neck. Her fingers felt warm on Mal's skin.

"Do you want to see it on you?" Sophia asked. Mal hesitated, and then slipped past her friend and towards the bathroom without a word. The lights were already on as she stepped in and examined the dress on her. There weren't any patterns on it, no decorations either. It was tapered to her hips, but there was no one hem for her waistline. Everything was one big block of fabric. It had a high neckline too – very modest - but looked very nice. Mal turned to examine her look from behind and nodded in approval.

"That's a lovely dress on you." Sophia smiled from the doorway as she watched Mal appraise the outfit. "Belle did well. It'll keep you warm too."

"Won't the living room be warm enough?" Mal asked, combing her hands through her hair as she continued examining herself.

"Yes, but it'll still be nice if you go on the balcony," Sophia explained. "Want me to pull your hair up? We have time."

Mal considered. She hadn't planned on it. After all, it was just Ben, Belle, Adam, maybe Lumiere and Sophia. But the dress was pretty, and so after a second, she nodded. "Yeah, that would be nice. Thank you."

Sophia got straight to work, braiding her hair up into a high ponytail. Mal's hair, which had been layered and short in the back when she'd first come to Auradon, was now long. It hung past her shoulder blades in heavy, dark purple waves. Sophia pulled her into the bathroom and gave her hair a quick curl and hung some simple white gem earrings in her ears before she let Mal go admire herself again. She stayed in the doorway of the bathroom and smiled as she watched Mal swish her head from side to side to see the pretty braid that guided the left part of her hair into the ponytail. It was strange to see such a hairstyle on her. She looked almost like Evie.

A knock sounded at the door in the other room and jolted Mal out of her thoughts. She took a few steps and entered the main room. "Come in!" She called to the door.


"Not really." Mal chuckled as she turned. A bright pink blush danced over her cheeks nonetheless.

"Absolutely." Lumiere said. "Nary a beauty like you I've met since my Plumette. You are a lovely beyond beauty."

into her dress pocket and pulled out a cluster of silver bells. "Would you like some bells?" She asked.

"Bells?" Mal asked.

"Ah, mademoiselle." Lumiere began to talk, effectively cutting off Sophia before she could explain. "Queen Belle made it tradition many years ago for her to wear bells in her hair during the winter."

"Yes," Sophia agreed. "I've heard many stories of how she and Ben would cause mischief all throughout the halls, and you could only judge where they were by the sound of the bells in her hair."

"Aye." Lumiere nodded. "Many times, I only had moments to dive out of the way before the barreled me over."

"Is it true he used to be able to hide in the chandelier in the entrance hall?" Sophia asked. Immediately, Lumiere winced and began to shake his head.

"He would climb up the door, standing on the handle, onto the frame and then swing into it. It was strong enough to hold him so he wouldn't fall, and there were so many crystals you couldn't see him unless you were looking for him." Lumiere groaned, rubbing the bridge between his eyes. "He and his mother – they were partners in crime. He would fake sickness to get her out of meetings, she would bribe him with chocolate to help her set up pranks on Adam…" He trailed off with a deep, longsuffering sigh.

Mal listened carefully. "It sounds like a dream." She said wistfully, trying to imagine what a young Ben would have looked like. "Yes, bells sound lovely." She told Sophia. "Can you please help me with them?"

Sophia smiled and walked over to Mal. Mal bent down as the taller woman tied five belles around the base of her ponytail. As she finished, Mal moved her head experimentally. The tinkling of delicate silver filled the room. Everyone smiled.

"Did you need something, by the way, Lumiere?" Mal asked as she reached up and wrapped her hand against the cold metal of one of the bells.

"Aye, thank you for reminding me. Ben sent me for you. He says he thinks it's about to snow. Everyone has gathered in the family room, and there is a cup of hot chocolate with your name on it." Lumiere informed her with a smile.

"I'll take you down." Sophia offered with a bright smile. She turned out a few lights and checked to make sure the windows were stopped up properly.

"I can walk myself." Mal told her.

"I know you can, but I want to see what Ben thinks of you." Sophia explained with a quick wink at Lumiere.

Lumiere chuckled. Mal raised an eyebrow. "I'd tell you what he said, you know."

"I know, but it's a different thing all together to watch his face change." Sophia laughed. Mal's light blush finally turned to a deep scarlet as Lumiere and Sophia laughed at her.

Lumerie opened the door with a bow and a bright smile. He and Sophia trailed after her as she walked down the hall toward the family room.
Candles had been lit around the room, which didn't do much for warmth, but were beautiful as far as decoration spoke. The furniture had been rearranged, and a large tree was set up in between the furnace and the open balcony doors. Boxes of pretty ornaments sat around the couches, still sealed. Despite the doors being open, it was toasty inside. The furnace was blaring, and a kettle with four empty mugs sat on a side table. Towels had been laid down around the tiled area of the balcony to soak up the melting snow as it fluttered inside. It wasn't snowing yet, but the sky outside was dark and grey, and the air was frigid.

Belle sat on a couch with Adam parallel to her. They shuffled through the boxes around their feet and examined colorful lights. As Mal walked in, Adam looked up. "Do I hear bells?" He asked before he saw Mal and let a bright smile light up his face. Mal shrunk a little. She'd never seen Adam look so happy because of her.

"I didn't move," Belle said distractedly as she unboxed a string of lights. Mal smiled as she saw the cluster of silver bells in her mother-in-law's hair. Adam elbowed Belle lightly, and Belle glanced up. When she saw Mal, she began to tear up. "Well, look at you." She said. "I knew that dress would be a good match for you."

"Thank you for it," Mal said as she gave a small twirl. The velvet material caught the light and shimmered. She sat beside Belle on the couch. Belle reached up and ruffled the bells in Mal's hair. "What are you doing?" Mal asked, reaching down and helping Belle withdraw the light strings out of the box.

"Decorating," Belle said, nodding to the tree. "Adam pulled that up this afternoon, and we're going to decorate it now."

Mal examined the tree with a critical eye. It was shapely and even. And real. They had a real tree inside. It was held upright by a metal prop screwed into the base of the tree.

"Won't the tree die?" She asked.

"It'll stay green for a few weeks." Belle said distractedly.

Adam set a hand on Mal's shoulder. "In Auradon, we decorate a tree for Christmas, which, unfortunately, will pass before you return from the moors. We hang ornaments and put gifts underneath for Christmas morning."

"Oh. That's peculiar." Mal said. She paused. Had the word peculiar just come out of her mouth? What an Auradon/queenly thing to say. "Why do you do that?"

"It's tradition." Adam shrugged. He took the end of a cord from Belle and stood up to plug it into the wall. The lights lit up in dozens of beautiful colors.

"Viola." Belle said proudly. "They all still work."

She unraveled and untangled the cords as Adam knelt down and began to wrap the lights around the lower branches of the tree. Mal watched for a few seconds, then looked around. She spotted Sophia and Lumiere still waiting in the doorway and realized she didn't know where Ben had escaped to. She turned and looked out to the balcony, and saw a shadow leaning nonchalantly on the railing, looking up at the sky. She stood up and skirted around the boxes and couch and headed outside. Lumiere and Sophia moved to the center of the room to watch as she vanished from sight.

As she left the room, she understood why Ben hadn't come inside to see her. She couldn't hear anything – not Belle and Adam talking, not the furnace cracking. It was completely silent except...
for her feet as she walked. There was no wind, and the air was completely still.

Ben turned as she approached. When he saw her, his eyes grew a little large and his smile faded as he took a deep, cold breath. "Wow." He breathed.

Mal's cheeks went bright pink. "Hi." She said.

"You look good." He complimented her.

"You do too." She returned. She leaned against the railing and admired him. He had a themed sweater on. It had reindeer and trees like the one inside on it. Wool pajama bottoms, black socks, and slippers covered the lower half of him. Mal chuckled. "That is probably the least princely I've ever seen you look." She told him.

He laughed and put his arms around her. Mal wasn't very cold with her thick dress on, but the warmth was still much appreciated, as was the smell of pen ink and cologne he was wearing.

It was so dark she couldn't see the ground down below her. The front of the castle was lit up, but she couldn't see that from here. There was only the balcony, and the sky surrounding them on all sides.

Mal leaned back into Ben and sighed. He took one of her hands and began to massage the knuckles, which felt really nice since she'd spent all day writing and typing. After a few minutes, Ben stopped and pointed at the sky. "Look." He whispered.

Mal looked, but she couldn't see anything for a few seconds. Then, something white floated past her cheek. She blinked and flinched back from it. Three more wandered down on a path to the ground, right past her nose. Mal held out the free hand that Ben wasn't holding, and a pinprick of cold and white landed in her palm and melted. She gasped.

Ben's arms released her as she stretched her hands up. She caught more of the flakes in her hands as they floated down like a rain of shredded paper. When one landed on her dress, she inspected it. It was made of pretty patterns of ice and frost.

"Watch this." Ben smiled. He opened his mouth, stuck out his tongue, and caught a flake on his tongue.

Mal gasped. "You ruined it!" She accused.

"No, I didn't!" Ben protested. "It would have melted anyway. Here, you try it." He steered her to the balcony edge with his hands.

Hesitantly, Mal stuck out her tongue. A white flake flew in her eye and made her flinch backward and blink. She tried once more, and one landed on the tip of her tongue. Her face contorted, and Ben laughed at her as he caught another one. She watched a snowflake land in his eyebrow as he ran his thumb down her chin. "Can I kiss you?" He whispered.

Mal laughed, hesitated, and got on her tiptoes to kiss him as snowflakes swirled around them.

Inside, Belle, Adam, Lumiere, and Sophia had gathered to watch Mal's first interaction with snow in Auradon. Belle wished she'd had a camera to record Mal's shocked expression when she first saw one flit by her face. A thought that had been occurring to her more often as of late pressed at her chest.

Lumiere and Sophia chuckled as they watched Ben and Mal give each other a quick hug. "I'd better
run upstairs and make sure we've sealed everything up." Lumiere smiled.

"Mhm," Sophia agreed. "I'm going to go and meet up with Stewart after I help Lumiere. Enjoy your evening."

Their two servants left the room with the door closing behind them.

Belle continued half-watching Ben and Mal outside, and half unraveling lights. She swallowed, and finally decided to voice her thoughts.

"Adam." She started quietly. Adam hummed to let her know he'd heard her as he plugged in a new string of lights and began moving up on the tree. "What do you think of Mal?" She asked.

Adam thought for a few seconds. "She's a lovely girl. I didn't expect the daughter of Maleficent to be so civilized and smart."

"She gets along well with Ben." Belle probed.

"That she does, luckily." Adam stuck his tongue out of his mouth as he strung the lights around a particularly misshaped branch. No tree was completely perfect, unfortunately. "I'd hate for them to be miserable as we get this whole mess sorted out." Adam paused, then asked: "I wonder if he'll go back to Audrey after all this?"

"No," Belle said immediately. "That ship has long since sunk. Thankfully. But... Adam-" She turned and faced him instead of the doorway. "Would it be so terribly bad if they stayed like this?"

Adam fumbled the lights and stared at his wife incredulously. "What are you saying?" He asked.

"Well..." Belle fumbled over her words. "They work so well together, and it's clear they like each other a lot. Maybe give it a few more months and we can call it true love and-"

"Belle." Adam interrupted her. "This isn't a book. We all want a happy ending, but these are real people's lives. While Mal is a lovely girl, she's also a very free spirit. The idea of queendom doesn't appeal. She's taken it up out of fear of returning to her mother. If and when the spell is broken, and she is neither faced with the threat of returning to the Isle or being trapped here forever, who knows what she will do? It's not fair to imply that Ben and Mal will stay together when we have no idea what forever will look like in a few months. Fairy Godmother, while they haven't gotten far, is still working on unraveling that curse. She could break it in thirteen years, she could break it next June. I like Mal, but the fact is she could leave just as easily as she came."

"I get it." Belle withered. She continued unraveling lights a great deal sadder than she had been a few minutes ago. Outside, Ben and Mal shared another kiss. His arms pulled around her lithe frame, and one of her arms pulled his head down against her cheek. Both of their mouths were open, so Belle could only assume something French was going on there.

With a sigh, Belle finished untangling the rest of the lights and started helping her husband string the tree as Ben and Mal stood outside, catching snowflakes in their hair and on their clothes as they kissed each other. Meanwhile, Adam's heart was in turmoil.

It turns out he hadn't been the only one wondering what it would be like if Mal became a permanent fixture in their lives. He wasn't sure if he should be frightened by the fact Belle agreed with him or happy that they were still on the same page after all these years. He wasn't quite sure what to do with all these thoughts in his head, because at first he'd have been all too happy to let Mal drop out of their lives, but now that they were both laughing and smiling together, clearly happy, Adam wasn't quite sure which idea he hated more: villainy tied to the throne of Auradon or
Ben having to say goodbye to the purple-haired teen.

He'd been sorting things out: they couldn't keep Mal here forever like this. If five years were to pass and nothing changed with the spell… eventually Ben would grow old. There would have to be someone else to eventually put on the throne. Like it or not, at the moment, that was Mal's responsibility. If she couldn't handle it then…

And, deep down, Adam had a different secret. He'd been staying up late, thinking of Belle's old dreams of children and grandchildren, and he'd been dreaming of purple-haired little kids. Despite all the logic and the reasons he could conjure up of how unfair it was for him to wish that future on his son and this poor, mistreated teen, he wanted that future just as much as Belle did.

Outside, Mal felt content. On the Isle, snow meant cold, frozen toes and fingers. It meant the air became toxic where pollution was bad, and light was scarce because the snow formed on top of the barrier and fell through in odd, grey chunks. Here, snow was chocolate drink and lights on trees inside. Snow was a snack that didn't fill you up and gentle air kisses from mother nature. Snow was Ben kissing her with growing passion like he'd rather kiss her than do anything else.

His hand breezed past her face like the wind as he played her mouth with his tongue and pressed their bodies together. Mal had never had anyone kiss her like this before. He bit her lip as his arms crushed her against him. She moaned - a bit audibly - as a deep fire erupted in her chest.

They paused in their facial struggles for a second as snowflakes landed in her eyelashes. Ben brushed snowflakes out of her ponytail with one hand and pressed his mouth back – face-value - onto hers. Mal forgot how to breathe for a second as he caught her lip with his teeth for a second.

After several minutes, they finally subsided and stood with their arms around each other as the snow fell around them and began to pile around the balcony in fluffy heaps like sparkly glitter.

Ben whispered in her ear: "I think mom and dad are almost done stringing the tree."

His breath came out in a puff of fog. Mal held her hand in front of her face and exhaled. A little cloud formed in front of her eyes. She smiled. "Okay." She whispered. They broke apart. She fixed her hair, self-conscious considering she'd just full-out snogged Ben a few feet from his parents. "Do I look bad?" She asked him.

"Impossible." He waved a hand at her worries.

They walked back over the threshold. Mal was immediately stunned by the change in temperature as she walked into the furnace-fueled room. Belle and Adam were stringing the last of the lights upon the highest branches. Mal was stunned. The twinkly lights looked beautiful. They'd been wrapped in a way that made it seem almost like the colorful lights had grown out of the tree. The idea made Mal homesick for the moors.

Ben picked up a large cardboard box and opened it. Mal leaned against his shoulder as he lifted the lid to reveal white bubble wrap. She furrowed her brow as he pushed it aside and revealed a beautiful three-dimensional star with white glass and a gold-colored metal holding it together.

"Pretty." She said. "What is it?"

"A tree topper," Ben explained. "It goes up on top." He moved to the tree with an outstretched arm. Mal stood back and watched as Adam tucked the end of the strand around the top of the tree, and Ben reached up past him to set the star on the top. He wasn't quite tall enough though, so the star sat at an angle. Ben groaned as he tried to hop and nudge it into place. Mal waved him aside.
"Let me." She commanded. She concentrated and flicked her finger upright. The star righted itself.

Belle gave Adam a look. After a few seconds, she declared: "I'm not going to say anything if you aren't."

Adam shook his head, looking weary. "I already lost that argument with Ben." He grumbled, crossing his arms and looking a bit sour.

Belle fixed her eyes on Mal. "Well." She said. "You are your own Queen, but you should probably know that Auradon does discourage against most magics. Fairy Godmother oversees. I won't stop you, but just be aware lots of people will take the opportunity to criticize."

"Auradon doesn't discourage." Ben said lightly. He paused. "They discriminate." He finished, turning on his heel and picking up a clear box filled with beautiful blue plastic bulbs. Beautiful snowflake patterns stretched across them.

Adam frowned. "That's not true," He interjected. Belle promptly held a hand up in his face.

"False." She told him. "Incorrect. Imprudent."

Ben picked up a plastic baggie with hooks and began to wrestle them free of each other. He hooked one on a bulb and handed it, the first one, to Mal. She held it, unsure of what to do with it as he sorted more hooks out. "Dad, most Auradonians single out what is different or unique. Mom was ostracized for reading and thinking, you were isolated as a beast, and you still think Auradon isn't judgmental?"

"Ben, that was ages ago, and there is good in everyone. But what you're proposing – bringing back magic – while admirable, would open Auradon to thousands of new problems. There are reasons we restricted it in the first place. It's too hard to fight fire with fire." Adam sighed.

"Why was it you wanted your statue in front of Auradon Prep to morph from Beast to Man?" Ben asked. He stood up straight and squared off with his father. Adam was silent. "Anything is possible dad. I found the most amazing person in a villain. The Isle of the Lost will be healed to become good again. The moors have reconnected. Maleficent's spell worked around the barrier on the Isle, and I will bring magic back to Auradon again."

Silence clouded the room. Belle and Mal exchanged looks, and Belle put a hand on Adam's shoulder. "If anything, let's not discuss this tonight. We are together as a family, and it is Mal's first Christmas in Auradon. If I'd known you'd have so much to say over her fixing a tree topper, I wouldn't have said anything. Now, let's move on. We can talk politics at a later date."

Ben walked around the couch, away from Adam. He noticed Mal was still holding the hook of the bulb. "Aren't you going to hang it up?" He asked.

"Is that what you do with it?" Mal asked. She examined the bulb.

"Yeah," Ben snorted. "Want me to lift it up so you can put it near the top?"

Mal made a face. "I'm not that short." She protested.

Ben held up his hands in surrender. "I know you're not." He defended. "I was just asking if I could."

Mal pursed her lips and stalked to the tree without a word. Looking up at it, she saw that it was quite tall. She let out a sigh. "Okay." She said. No sooner had she muttered the word than a
pair of hands wrapped around her hips.

"On the count of three, give a little jump," Ben instructed. Mal bent down a little as Ben counted back and jumped at the same time as he lifted her. She shot right by his head and quickly placed the bulb on a high branch before he put her back on the ground.

"Thanks." She said.

"No problem." He said, leaning down to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. "We should take dance classes together."

"Uh huh," Mal agreed, skeptically. "And then we can have overlapping surgeries when I mutilate your feet and break my leg in one fell swoop?" Ben laughed, so Mal continued. "We could get casts in a matching color and sign each other's cast with our best ugly signatures."

Ben snorted and picked up two new bulbs from where his dad was hooking them. He handed one to Mal, and together with Belle, they began to decorate the tree. Mal was amazed by the variety of ornaments they had. There were silver bows hung from white cords, sparkly snowflakes, blue jewels, and white icicle-shaped rods that spun as they hung. After about an hour, the tree was laden with all sorts of lovely decorations. Only three boxes were left. Ben frowned as he looked underneath the couches and under all the other boxes they'd already used.

"What are you looking for?" Mal asked, getting down to help him look.

"A box like these," Ben said, tapping the remaining boxes on the couch. They were small, brown, and about the size of Mal's phone. Ben looked up at Belle. "Did it not come in?" He asked. Belle shrugged.

Mal didn't know what he was talking about, so she sealed her lips and sat down as he continued looking. There was a knock at the door. Lumiere opened it, holding the fourth box Ben was looking for. "This was in your office, Ben." He informed them, giving a disapproving look. "I hope you hadn't put them up yet."

"Not yet," Ben shook his head, sitting up and looking relieved. "Thank you, Lumiere. You're welcome to stay if you want." He walked over and took the box from Lumiere.

"No thank you." Lumiere shook his head. "I think I'm going to turn in now. Have a good night." He shut the door behind him as everyone wished him good luck, and Ben turned with the box in his hands.

"Alright, Mal. We have these things we call family ornaments. Everyone in the family has one, and I got this one for you. My parents got theirs when they first got married, and they got me one when I was born." He pressed it into Mal's hand. "So here you go. Merry Christmas."

Mal was stunned. She stared at Ben. And then at the box in her hands. "Family ornament?" She asked.

Ben, Belle, and even Adam nodded encouragingly.

Mal bit her lip. She didn't ask any more questions because she didn't want to make it sound like a big deal, but it really was a big deal to her. She ran her hand over the box, which was imprinted with a pattern, and lifted the lid. She brushed tissue paper aside and lifted a delicate metal ornament. Belle laughed when she saw what it was.

It was a metal dragon with purple accents curled around a green crystal the shade of her own eyes.
Atop its head was a small, silver crown. Mal began to beam and quickly covered her mouth as a strange thing happened to her eyes. It was like they went swimming, and suddenly her world was underwater. Her chest felt like she had several weights set on it.

Ben took the box out of her lap and helped her up. He guided her to the tree, where she hesitated before hanging her little dragon in between a snowflake and a blue gemstone. It bobbed and twirled in the light of the furnace before finally settling on the branch.

Ben hugged her from behind and kissed the top of her head.

Belle and Adam opened their own boxes. Belle's was of herself in her classic yellow ball gown that she'd danced with the Beast in and holding a book under her arm. Adam's, meanwhile, was the beast. It didn't morph or anything, but simply displayed himself in the form that Belle had first loved him in.

"What's yours?" Mal asked as she wiped the water from her eyes before it could fall.

"Oh, it's pretty great," Ben smirked. He let go of her, picked up the last box, and unwrapped it. Inside was the likeness of a branch twisted into a circle, with three birds sitting on it, wearing crowns. Ben let her examine it for a few seconds before he explained it. "The birds are an owl, a dove, and a phoenix. An owl is supposed to be a symbol of wisdom, the dove is supposed to be a sign of peace, and the phoenix is a symbol of rebirth. My parents hoped I would grow up to be a leader who would bring wisdom, peace, and rebirth to Auradon."

"Wow," Mal said, smiling. Ben stood up and hung it on the tree a few feet from Mal's dragon. Above their two, Belle's Belle and Adam's Beast spun near each other with bright glass smiles.

As Mal, Adam, and Ben gathered all the empty ornament boxes into an easily-manageable pile, Belle poured four mugs of hot chocolate. She handed them out, and they sat down on the couches. Adam pulled up Christmas songs on his laptop. Mal didn't know any of the words, but she liked them nonetheless. She sat beside Ben on a couch facing the tree as they began to talk.

"I'm sad you'll miss Christmas," Ben said after a while.

"And the new year," Belle added. "Bad luck."

Mal swirled her mug carefully. "I was thinking… maybe if I stay an extra few days to the end of January, then I wouldn't be leaving in the middle of the month anymore. That way, Ben and I won't be celebrating our anniversary as I'm leaving to the moors, and I won't miss things like Christmas."

"That's smart." Belle nodded. She hid a small smile at the words 'our anniversary'.

"Let's see…" Adam sighed, counting back on his fingers. "January, March, May, July, September, November, rinse and repeat."

"Your birthday…" Ben frowned.

"And yours." Mal returned. "We'll have to do something when I come back those months." She released one hand and rested it on Ben's knee, where she began rubbing little circles into it.

"She'll miss Summer Solstice." Belle shrugged, watching Mal's fingers.

"And winter solstice for this year, but that's all well and dandy. It's being held at Agrabah. They're not much for winter." Adam shrugged.
Ben snorted. "True. Isn't it at Elsa's next year?" He asked. He leaned over and put an arm around Mal's shoulders, and she leaned into his grasp on instinct alone.

"Yes, and that is one you won't want to miss!" Adam declared, slapping the couch. "Lights, everywhere! Snow, and music, and treats with powdered sugar!" Belle and Mal chuckled at his enthusiasm.

Ben put his hand over Mal's. "When you get back in February, we'll have to have you open your presents." He whispered.

"Presents?" Mal asked, crinkling up her nose in curiosity.

"Yeah." Ben smiled. "You didn't think we were going to forget about you, did you?" Truthfully, Mal hadn't even had any thoughts on the idea of presents. She drummed her fingers as she wondered what she was supposed to be doing in return.

"I'll have you get you each and Lumiere, Sophia, and Stewart something then." She nodded.

"We won't think any less of you." Belle waved her off.

"Mph." Mal sighed contentedly. She took Ben's hand, turned it around, and began tracing his fingers lightly. "Next year," She yawned. "I'll stay at the palace for Christmas."

Ben smiled as he watched her examine his hand. "Now, wouldn't that be incredible?" He murmured.

As Ben and Mal continued their banter, they failed to see Belle arch her head back and meet her husband's gaze. Both their eyes were alight. 'Next year.' Belle mouthed. A bright smile stretched across Adam's mouth.

Adam wrapped his arms around his Queen as the fire crackled and Ben and Mal talked playfully while she examined Ben's hands. Next year, there would be another snowfall, another tree, another Christmas. Hopefully, next year, there would also be one more set of hands.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Mal leaves for the Moorlands. Ben experiences rampant sleeplessness, which they believe are curse side-effects. He travels to Agrabah for the Solstice and reunites with old friends. Christmas, New Years, and Mal's birthday all pass.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the sixteenth of December, Mal walked herself down to the circle with Ben, Sophia, Stewart, and Lumiere in tow. The palace guards had emptied the circle last night after protestors had broken three of the lights leading up to the palace and dumped paint everywhere. Mal had to be careful as she stepped over half-frozen purple, blue, and white paint in dangerous slippy sheets. Ben's face pinched with worry as he watched her load her suitcase in the trunk of his old car, which she'd decided to ride since the roads and the cold were hard on the carriage. Sophia put a picnic basket of food in the passenger seat, along with Mal's cell phone.

"You'll text when you get there?" Ben asked as he leaned against the closed rear-passenger door. Mal was leaning through the open rear-driver's seat door.

"Yes, Ben. I'll text." Mal smiled as she tucked three blankets along the floor with two notebooks and a pencil on top.

"Do you have the card to buy gas?" Ben asked, drumming his hands on the window.

"I've got it, I've got it." She chuckled. She could see him nervously tapping out of the corner of her eyes as she walked around the car.

"Are you sure you don't need someone to come along and make sure you're okay? It is a long drive." He worried.

"Ben." She smiled, reaching him and putting her hands on her hips. "Calm down. I'm okay. I have directions, a map, a GPS, and my phone. There's blankets, food, gas, and radio. I'll text you when I get there and when I leave. And yeesh, I know how to drive. You act like we didn't have those lessons almost every night last September."

"It wasn't icy then," Ben argued. He scuffed his heel in the colorful snow on the edge of the driveway to make his point.

"I have snow chains and I know what to do if the car starts to skid." Mal rolled her eyes. "Seriously, it'll be okay. And as a last resort, there's magic."

"Magic?" Ben repeated with a deep-set frown as she reached up and pecked the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, you'll use your nature magic to fix a car in anti-thaumaturgy Auradon if anything goes wrong."

Mal tolled her eyes again. "Anyone want a king? He's for sale." She joked, punching him in the arm lightly. Mal hugged Sophia and Stewart. Even Lumiere got a hug. Then, she turned to Ben, got
on her tip-toes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and gave him a quick kiss for luck. After that, she walked around to the driver's side door and opened it up. The car was already running, and warm air billowed out in a misty cloud. "Bye guys!" She waved.

Everyone waved and called bye except for Ben, who shifted like he wanted to ask again if someone could go with her. Mal smiled. "Bye babe." She said, much quieter. Ben's cheeks turned bright red. She smiled, and slipped inside, closing the door behind her. He watched through the tinted windows as she slipped on a pair of sunglasses and put on some strawberry-flavored chapstick. She pulled her seatbelt over her shoulder and slid the car into gear. Slowly, the car disappeared from in front of him and out of his sight.

Stewart patted his shoulder. "Don't worry about her. She's strong and capable. And she needs this freedom. She just doesn't know it yet."

Ben nodded. After all, Mal had been by his side practically since she'd arrived in July. That's almost five months completely with him. He could spare her for a month until she came back. And then another. And one more. Indefinitely. And he had to trust she wouldn't run away and refuse to come back, proving that he'd made the wrong decision. It wasn't as much that Ben didn't trust Mal, it's just that he was infinitely afraid of her dying at the moors and taking him out with her. Still, he considered how there was still a chance she would want to stay at the moors, therefore dooming him to the excruciating pain of bearing Maleficent's curse by himself, running the Isle and his own kingdom, and losing his best friend, all in one fell swoop. As anxiety set in, his mind ran crazy.

It was entirely possible Mal might be stopped by robbers on the road, who would quickly discover she was the queen and kill her before she could magic them into oblivion. Then, they would hold her body for ransom whilst cutting off her purple hair and selling it on some sort of twisted black market. Ben imagined a label reading: Former Queen of Auradon's Hair – 20,000 dollars.

Of course, there was no guarantee Mal wouldn't run over the robbers the moment they stopped her on the road, so the worst he might have to deal with is rumors that the queen was a murderess and a few minor scrapes on his old car.

It was also entirely possible that her foot would catch on a root and she would fall and hit her head on a rock that would be driven an inch and a half into her forehead, and they wouldn't be able to recover her body because she'd be in the moors. The moor people would close the barrier forever and he'd never even see Mal's body. Fae would turn her corpse into a new flower that would spread across the kingdom and to the Isle, and Audrey would spitefully send him bouquets every holiday.

On second thought, most of the moor people had magic and were really good at healing. And the forest floors were magically smooth. She'd probably be fine. Probably. Also, he wasn't sure if he couldn't journey to the moors independently. Mal had told the creatures to be nice to him and had introduced him and everything. Really, who knew?

But there were so many other variables! She could be struck by lightning, she could be struck by a sudden residue curse from her mom, she could have a heart attack and die, or her car could slide off the road and into a brick wall…

Ben pushed his increasingly nonsensical visions away. He knew he was being silly. Mal was extremely capable. The chances of something like a root or lightning were laughable by normal people's standards, but Mal was part fae and had been raised on the Isle of the Lost. She was hearty and healthy, and honestly one of the most naturally-talented drivers Ben had come across if a bit reckless.

As he romped up to his office to begin work, he forced himself to accept what he already knew. He
was afraid of losing her. Not for the curse or for her kingdoms, but because she was a friend. She teased him for looking away during Bambi and thought he was nerdy for adoring Hiro Hamada and Louis Robinson's stories. He liked the way she challenged things he'd known all his life and liked the sarcastic, playful front she put up around new people. Her castle page had become one of his most favorite website pages because he liked how she related to the common people more than anyone else in his family did. She knew what it was like to be dirt poor and to starve for a few days. She taught him about what that was like. He'd never even known how unfair they'd been to the villain kids until she shut him out of her room that first day after turning him on his head about everything he'd ever known.

He hadn't told her yet, but he was pretty sure he was in love with her. Like, 98% sure. She was smart as a whip, prettier than any other person he'd seen, sassy, kind, artistic and honest. And queenly. She demanded the same respect from others that his mom had as queen. She didn't speak like a queen or act like one, but he recognized her divine right to rule in her intelligence, compassion, and determination. If those weren't queenly things, he obviously didn't know royalty very well.

Up in his office, he finished typing his proclamation on the open waters around Auradon and explained how commercial boats needed to avoid the barrier and leave boats ferrying back and forth alone. If things escalated, he'd have to hammer out an official law with Mal, but for now, he hoped this would help things. He sent it to Doug for formatting. When Doug sent it back, he'd put it on his page on the castle site and file it with the palace record system.

Underneath two letters from Aladdin regarding Winter Solstice and one from Pocahontas, he discovered a small treasure. It was an envelope with his name written on the front in his mom's curly handwriting. Inside were two calligraphy papers covered in pretty fonts. His mom had taken his and Mal's coronation blessings and written them out for him and her in her best, most queenly calligraphy. Ben smiled and leaned back in his chair to read his.

"Benjamin Florian Benson," it began in large letters. Ben skimmed the introduction. When someone was chosen to give a person's blessing, they would hold the Fairy Godmother's wand or some other prophetic tool before the ceremony with a spell attached and receive glimpses of that person's future. As soon as the blessing was given, the gift of prophecy would be removed, and that person would no longer remember what they had seen. Adam had done Ben's, and Doug had, of course, done Mal's.

Ben examined the words his dad had used. "Great and marvelous things." It said. It'd already been two months, but Ben didn't feel like he'd done a lot. He'd funded the Isle of the Lost so that it could start rebuilding under Mal's crazy idea, asked ships to leave business alone, and lowered taxes by .0006%. Some great and marvelous king.

The next lines opened his head to thoughts he'd had but hadn't dared dwell on. 'you are not, and never have considered yourself, the hero of your own tale'.

It was true. Growing up, he didn't have the same extravagant get-things-done personality type the heroes had. He was a personality type B, the deuteragonist, the supporter. He'd rather do what he was told than forge his own path. Still, being told in the blessing that made him king of an entire nation that he wasn't the hero of his own story kind of…stung. He wanted to have some sense of closure from it. "Hey Ben, don't worry, you're going to be amazing and you're a fantastic leader, even if you're not the primary hero." At least the next line helped: "your name will be blotted down as the greatest king in Auradonian history."

Not one of the greatest, but the greatest. The huzzah of huzzahs. And he was only the second in
line. Either that meant Auradon wouldn't last long, or his descendants would forever be trying to live up to him.

"There will come a period of time where there will be no suffering upon the face of the land… including in the parts you have abdicated unto your new wife."

With a line like that, it wasn't hard to believe he could one day be a really, really good king.

His mind was once again brought back to the 'you are not the primary hero' line at the next and final part of his blessing. "You and Mal will build up an empire unto your kingdom and unto yourselves." The line filled him with such a rush of pride and excitement that, for a moment, he immediately understood why he didn't feel the urge to go out and conquer and prove his worth. Family was the most important thing to him, and while there were certainly barriers to be crossed and problems to be solved, he was the personality to love his family and build relationships, not love his victories and build stories.

"You have no need to fear for the future. Do your best and all things will work for your favor."

Ben sighed. He wished his blessing said more. Would Auradon grow? When would his parents die, and what would he do then? Would the moors join with Auradon? Would the Isle of the Lost heal? What would happen to him and Mal as they got older?

He set his paper down and looked at the envelope with Mal's blessing. His fingers itched. Technically, it was for her, not him. On the other hand, the blessing had been given to the entire kingdom, and it was public domain. Plus, Mal probably wouldn't care. Probably.

He opened the paper.

Mal's was much, much longer than his. His mom had had to write smaller to fit everything. Ben was momentarily jealous, but then he reasoned that Mal had a rocky life where she had been uprooted from everything she'd ever known, and the entire kingdom had been skeptical about her coming to the throne, so she probably needed the guidance.

Words popped out to him, like "Explicit worthiness to rule this kingdom", and 'you are not a normal queen.' An odd sense of closure settled over him. This was not a coincidence. He had not just happened to be cursed to the purest, kindest girl on the Isle. This was Fate, spinning her threads and creating the map of destiny. He couldn't help sensing the correlation between Mal's "explicit worthiness" and his "you are not the hero of your tale." Something told Ben that he knew exactly who his protagonist was.

"Your sole kingdom, at this time, is that of The Isle of The Lost," Doug had said. Ben chuckled. 'At this time', as in, soon to change. Now, Mal possessed the Moorland. How prophetic.

Doug promised that Mal would have a glorious future and that she'd bring happiness to her kingdoms, but the parts that jumped out at Ben were the parts about him. 'Your marriage and your strong relationship with your husband will one day be your greatest achievement'. That implied a long time.

Ben hesitated upon seeing the next line. "Fear not about never seeing those you have left behind and whom you miss. You will have the opportunity to reconnect and rebuild."

Rebuild. Literally. She was constructing a new city and a new economy. But it struck Ben how she would be able to reconnect with people she'd left behind. Mal had, once, long ago, mentioned friends. People she'd left on the Isle. Ben stared at the words, and an idea began to form in the very
back of his mind. Mal had friends; people she missed. He wondered who they were. It was a small idea, but with a promise to grow into a mission; a quest.

Mal's blessing mentioned her family, but Ben wasn't sure what that would entail. Him and his parents? Maybe the husband mentioned wasn't even him, but someone else she would meet after the curse was broken? Of course, his blessing mentioned her by name and hers said: "you are entering this marriage", but no one could perfectly predict the future. Another thought on family whispered in the back of his mind: children, but he pushed it away. 'Mal is sixteen, seventeen next month'. He told himself. 'It's not fair to think that of her yet.' Or ever, considering the circumstances.

Lately, though, it had been hard not to want more of Mal. She was electric. He found himself wanting kisses and hugs and moments that took their breaths away more and more often. He was married to her, so it wasn't exactly a bizarre situation, but he wanted to remain fair to her. Again, she was seventeen. He was twenty-two. The age gap wasn't horrible and would grow even less notable with time, but it was definitely apparent now, in their youth.

Ben took a breath and schooled his feelings. He reached for his cell phone. Of course, there was no message from Mal, but he found the Fairy Godmother's contact. "Out of genuine curiosity, how is decoding the curse coming along?" He asked.

She didn't reply right away, which gave him the opportunity to balance a few budget books, but when she did it was a lengthy message.

"We've examined and mapped out the curse from every angle imaginable. It is intensely complex and strong. So far, we have found no chink in its armor. Maleficent made this in a clever manner. We have been pumping raw spell power into it as much as possible, hoping to unravel it at least a little, but so far, we have no luck. The magic either washes over it or is absorbed. The only way we think we could break it is if we were able to pump magic through it from the inside, but that's not possible as there is no way past the spell. In short, we have nothing yet."

Ben was left alone with his thoughts. He drummed his fingers on the table as he thought. Long-distance curse decoding was still at almost the same zero it had been when Mal had first arrived. The chances it would remain for a while longer or even indefinitely seemed high. Maybe once Mal was a little more powerful she'd be able to help them with it, but so far, they were at a standstill.

Let's say… four or five years down the road when Ben and Mal had gotten their kingdoms on a good path and she was at least his age now, what if they did decide to settle down? After all, it wouldn't make sense to wait seventy years and never consider what happened if the curse never broke, right? But let's say they were both a few years past twenty-two and they had a kid or two. Then the curse broke. Would Mal stay? Would she leave? Would they explain anything to Auradon?

So many solutions, so many problems, so many loopholes. Ben reached into the second drawer in his desk for aspirin and pushed his thoughts out of his mind. After all, there was work to do.

That night, Ben laid in bed, once again plagued by his own thoughts. He spiraled down his thought train with no avail. Mal had texted, informed him she'd made it safely, and sent a heart emoji. What did that mean? A heart? Did she love him? She'd kissed him, for sure, but they were married. She seemed to like him, but they didn't quite have the same charge that his parents had while he had grown up.

Several times Ben tried to roll over and go to sleep, but his mind kept running on overdrive. He
wished Mal was here to take his hand, so he didn't have to wonder.

He was tired, but his mind didn't want to shut off. There were things to be thought of. Had he sent that email to Prince Charming? When was Grumpy the dwarf coming to the palace again?

Ben knew he was in trouble when he rolled over in the early hours of the morning and realized the sky was brightening up. He hadn't slept a wink and now he was up and the next day was beginning. He and Mal would have climbed the sides of the castle if it was summer and if she was here and – oh, great. Now he was off on yet another tangent.

He dragged through the day with lots of coffee and loud music and returned to bed early the next night. His head hit the pillow and he curled into the sheets, expecting to be taken away in sleep's wonderful embrace. Nothing. He couldn't fall asleep. For the second night in a row, he laid completely awake all night, though this time his head was completely silent.

Two hours into the third night after being a zombie for two days, it occurred to him that something was wrong. He'd never had this much of a problem falling asleep before.

It wasn't that he wasn't falling asleep, it was that he couldn't fall asleep.

Ben stared blearily at his computer screen before putting his hands in his head. It was the twentieth of December, and he was officially running on his fourth day without more than a wakeful rest. He couldn't focus on anything anymore, and to make things all the more dramatic, he was supposed to be traveling for the winter solstice with his parents tomorrow.

A blinking red call button appeared on his call box. He hit the receive button, and Lumiere's voice echoed through the speaker. "The Fairy Godmother just arrived." He said.

"Fantastic. Send her up." Ben replied. He downsized everything on his computer screen and laid his head down on the desk. When a physician could find nothing wrong with Ben sans the obvious extreme lack of sleep, Lumiere had paged for the Fairy Godmother, who was busy while Auradon Prep prepared to let out for winter break but promised to come as soon as possible.

After fifteen minutes of Ben with his head practically glued to the desk and desperately trying to convince himself to open his eyes and try to do some work before the Fairy Godmother arrived, the door clicked open. Ben begrudgingly pushed his head up and began to blink furiously to clear his vision.

The Fairy Godmother was staring at him from the doorway with a soft smile. "Tired, much?" She teased.

"Very." Ben groaned, running his hands over his face.

She shut the door behind her and sat down in the chair in front of his desk. "When did this start?" She asked, smoothing her skirts over as she straightened her spine.

"Night of the sixteenth, I couldn't fall asleep. Haven't been able to get more than a weary rest since." Ben mumbled. He laid his head on his hand and yawned.

Fairy Godmother nodded. "Has Mal been experiencing the same thing?" She asked.

Ben shrugged. "I don't know. She's at the moors right now."

Fairy Godmother deadpanned. "Mal's gone?"
Ben nodded with his eyes closed. "The plan is for her to go to the moors every other month. She'll be back February first."

The Fairy Godmother crinkled her cheek and drummed her fingers on Ben's desk. "Now, Ben." She chuckled without humor. "When exactly did Mal leave?"

"The sixteenth." Ben yawned. He opened his eyes and met the Fairy Godmother's gaze. "Oh- Oh! You don't think this is related, do you? I didn't have this problem before we got married."

"Well." The Fairy Godmother sighed. "I can take a look at Maleficent's spell. It's possible she made it like this so that it would be impossible for you to live apart, but until Mal gets home and we see if she is also suffering, there's no way for us to know. Sleep was Maleficent's specialty."

"What about in the meantime?" Ben yawned. "We're leaving for the solstice tomorrow, and I can't run a kingdom like this."

"No, evidently not." The Fairy Godmother shrugged. "I know… a few spells… but I can't perform them without my wand. It's back in the museum, as you know. I only had it while using it the three months up to your coronation."

"I can send for it." Ben sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Fairy Godmother, I'm going to be honest with you, I've been encouraging Mal to use her magic as often as she can. Not for any real reason, but my heart is telling me it's the right thing to do. I want her to be able to do that."

The Fairy Godmother hesitated as she listened to Ben's words. "It… is still discouraged, Ben. You could cause her public problems."

"I know, I know." Ben sighed. "I think… I know that this is right though. It's better for her, and better for Auradon. She needs that power to back her up before the Public learns to trust her, and she has to rule the moors; a magically powerful kingdom. She needs it." He let loose a wild yawn. Fairy Godmother watched him.

"Send for the wand, Ben." She said softly. "Let's get you some rest."

Agrabah smelled like spices and scorched hair. Ben was glad they were arriving under the cover of darkness and leaving again before the sun rose. That way, he didn't have to worry about being burnt to a crisp under to unforgiving yellow rays of death. How Aladdin had lived all his youth on the streets and in the sun, he had no idea.

The wand had bought Ben four hours of restless sleep, and Fairy Godmother stayed to place him under a charm that let him sleep through the night. When he woke, he still felt exhausted, but immediately went about getting things done and getting ready to travel to Agrabah. He'd knocked out on the train for about a half-hour against his Mom's shoulder and then watched the day turn to night as the cars sped on, wishing desperately for more rest.

Inside the Sultan's palace, fake trees had been set up behind the thrones and in a few corners of the throne room. White 'snow' made of salt was spread around the throne bevel, and snowflakes hung from the ceiling. A few snowmen gathered forlornly beside a balcony beside a concessions table that consisted of dates, melons, plums, several types of kebab, dolma, and biryani, and some curry. Guests from hundred of royal families around the country wandered amongst each other, fanning themselves with complimentary fans that Jasmine and Aladdin had rightfully figured was the most acceptable party favor years ago. All of the large doors that lined the ballroom were open, letting the crisper desert air drift in.
Ben paused by a drinks table and picked up a glass of water. It was already warming, though ice had been added in copious amounts. A pale, slender hand seized a glass under his arm and he looked to his right as Princess Ericka of Arendelle straightened up, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "Evening." She muttered, examining the glass. It began to steam, and ice reformed inside. Ericka took a sip and let out a sigh. Ben examined her and completely forgot he was supposed to return her greeting. "Some winter party, huh?" She asked.

"Some." Ben nodded, closing his eyes for a few seconds and yawning. "I honestly wouldn't protest if someone started a snowstorm outside."

Ericka furrowed her brow. "You're not supposed to be encouraging that." She told him. Ben shrugged and yawned.

"Everyone knows your mom doesn't follow those rules anyway," He mumbled. "She here?"

"Is she ever outside of Arendelle?" Ericka shot back. Ben shrugged in acquiescence. Elsa, ever since the formation of Auradon, had been distant. She had intensive walls around her kingdom and was geographically isolated from everyone due to the mountains surrounding her kingdom. She only followed the rules that she wanted to follow, and the laws against magic didn't exactly fall under Elsa's approval, given the entire basis of her fairytale.

He honestly hadn't heard much from Elsa in years. The snow queen tended to avoid politics. All he knew was that she had another daughter, a four-year-old who had been coronated in private, in front of Arendelle citizens only. It'd have been a scandal if it was anyone besides Elsa. As it was, it was only the Snow Queen's second child without a father in sight. Ericka had been the scandal, but her younger sister was the repeat.

Ericka yawned widely and slipped away without a goodbye. Ben mourned the loss of the chill that surrounded her but didn't protest as she disappeared into the crowds. People's heads turned to watch her go as she walked.

"Ben!" A loud, booming voice came from behind him as someone who wasn't quite as tall as he tried to put a hand around his shoulder. "There you are!"

"Hey, Chad." Ben yawned, turning around to find a group of his old Auradon Prep classmates, now Auradon Accelerated students, all of them. His eyes drifted up and down Chad, Audrey, Lonnie, Jane, Aziz, Jordan, and Ally. He extended a hand, shaking all the boys' and then pressing a quick kiss to each of the girls'. Audrey let her heart linger in his a second too long. They all looked so different from the last time he'd seen them. Audrey had cut her hair shorter, to her shoulders with a taped back. "How are you all?"

"Not as wasted as you, apparently." Chad laughed. "What happened?"

"Oh, just a few stressful days of work." Ben waved them off. "You guys need to help me stay awake."

"I've got an idea!" Lonnie announced with a wicked smile, cracking her knuckles. "How about a little sparring? I'm sure I can beat you now that you're out of practice!"

"I'm not out of practice." Ben denied, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. "I have an actual Isle warrior who's been keeping me on my toes."

The mood darkened a little, and all of his friends exchanged curious, wary glances. Ben raised an eyebrow at them. "What?" He asked.
"It's so weird to think you're married now." Aziz huffed. "I can't believe it. It seems like just yesterday we were graduating and Jane tripped trying to grab her diploma and-

"Hey!" Jane yelped indignantly, slapping Aziz's arm. "But he's right. And someone from the Isle, too. What's Mal like?"

"I've met her," Audrey grumbled. "She's reckless. She almost lasered me through and climbs through the palace gutters…"

"The gutters?" Jane asked, furrowing her brow. Ben frowned at Audrey.

"Well, she's adventurous. And no, she wasn't going to laser you. She can't even do that." Ben rolled his eyes. "She's fabulous, really. It's really cool to-

"Her eyes were all lit up!" Audrey protested, cutting Ben off. "She totally possesses magic!"

"What's wrong with that?" Jordan frowned. Jane, too, crossed her arms.

Audrey sputtered as Ben rolled his eyes. "Yes, she does. She's the magical queen of the moors, remember?" He sighed. "But, as I was saying, it's really cool to see her interact with new things because she never got a lot of what we have in Auradon on the Isle. Like cell phones and the television and…” He trailed off with a soft smile. "Snow." He finished.

"She sounds lovely." Lonnie nodded approvingly. "How good is she with a sword?"

"Talented." Ben rolled his eyes. "But she plays dirty. She grew up battling pirates. She's beat me once, but that was using magic out in the moorlands."

"She uses magic?" Chad pinched his lips together into a frown. "How do you know she's not using it on you?"

Ben bit his cheek with a sigh. It wasn't like he could explain the principle of how Mal didn't exactly choose to marry him and that she still held grudges against Auradon, though it seemed she'd disconnected him from her idea of the evil, overbearing heroes. "She's not." He grumbled. "Believe me, we keep an eye on her."

"Why are you so against magic?" Jordan grumbled. "Are we all evil?"

Chad crossed his arms and grumbled. "Of course not, but we don't know this new person. How long have you known her, Ben?"

Ben closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Long enough to be married to her." He sighed dramatically.

"Is it an arranged marriage?" Lonnie asked. "I thought it was, since everything was being announced by 'the palace' instead of 'King Adam and Queen Belle'."

"Ah…” Ben trailed off, trying to remember if they'd ever released anything on it before. "Sort of?" He replied.

"She's so young." Aziz pointed out. "Isn't she like nineteen?"

Ben felt like sinking into his shoes a little. "Seventeen, actually." He mumbled. Lonnie made a sound like a gulp in the back of her throat, looking a bit surprised. "She's seventeen this coming month."
"That's only like, five years." Jordan shrugged. "But young for her. Your parents arranged this?"

"Why would your parents have you get married as you took the throne?" Chad frowned. "Workload balance?"

"Mal doesn't work on Auradon with me." Ben sighed. "She has her own country. We just… have a contract giving each other partial rights over the other, I guess. Politics-wise."

"She seems funny," Jane interjected before someone could cut her off. "I follow her blog, actually. The castle one. She's quite a jokester."

"She is." Ben smiled, relieved that the conversation was finally treading back into kinder waters. He turned to shield a yawn, and then returned to his friends. "She's very sarcastic and is a great admirer of irony. She's also very kind, very strong, and very bold."

Audrey frowned and crossed her arms. Meanwhile, Jane, Lonnie, Aziz, and Jordan were all nodding approvingly. "I want to meet her." Aziz declared. "Anyone who can beat Ben with a sword, even cheating, is someone I want to get to know."

"It was so unfair," Ben complained. "We had our swords locked and I was stepping on her foot and forcing her back, and she made the sword fly out of my hand and into a tree." He shook his head with a huff. "She's a dirty little cheat."

"Sounds lovely." Audrey huffed. "Ben, are you taken for the next dance?"

Ben blinked and listened to the whistling music around him. "Um, I probably shouldn't be dancing while I'm like this." He yawned. "I literally haven't slept well in five days." He grumbled.

"Dancing will wake you up." Audrey declared. She took a glass of a drink called sharbat from a passing waiter and took a long, slow sip. "Ugh, Aziz, your kingdom is too hot."

"I like it." Aziz shrugged. "Whenever we have to travel anywhere else, it's always freezing."

Ben sighed and slumped his shoulders. "I want a drink of something strong, on the rocks." He grumbled. Chad and Lonnie both nodded simultaneously. Audrey wrinkled her nose.

"Why?" She asked. "That stuff makes people violent."

Ben pinched his lips together. If Mal were here, Mal would roll her eyes with him. Actually… she'd turn and go grab Ben a drink herself if they'd let her. Maybe she'd take – or pretend to take – a few sips as she focused on Audrey's facial expression.

"I miss my wife." He sighed, pinching his brow.

"Where is she?" Chad asked, looking around the room for a head of purple hair. Ben shook his head.

"Moorlands." He grumbled. "Every other month. She has to go and make sure they're doing okay." He rubbed his eyes and yawned. "I need to go home." He declared. "I need my best friend back."

"That's cute." Jordan rolled her eyes. "So, what did Maleficent think of all this? That's her mom, right?"

Ben shrugged and rubbed his jaw. He felt like he was in an interview as he tried to deflect the question. "She approved it and saw Mal on her way to Auradon." He shrugged. "It is still way, way
weird to think my mother in law is the mistress of all evil."

The music changed and Audrey set her drink down. "Let's go for a turn, Benny-boo." She cooed, crossing their little circle of friends and pulling him towards the dance floor. Ben stumbled, waved helplessly to his old friends, and followed Audrey. They took up a close hold alongside all the other couples, and Ben turned over his shoulder to yawn.

"I kind of wanted to catch up with everyone, Audrey." He told her.

"There'll be time for that later." Audrey decided. "Tell me, are you okay? She hasn't hurt you at all, has she?"

"Hurt me?" Ben blinked. "No, no, Audrey. It's not what you think. We're really, really happy together." He guided her, in line of dance, through an underarm turn and hid a yawn as she came back to him. "She's… awesome."

"She's the daughter of a villainess." Audrey reminded him with a frown. "I'm just looking out for you. Are you sure she's not spelling you?"

"Positive, besides the general spell of her presence," Ben confirmed. "And by that, I mean I enjoy her presence. Seriously, Audrey, she's fantastic. I got really, really lucky."

Audrey frowned and shook her head. "I don't understand." She declared. "How could you be attracted to the child, and I mean a literal child, of the enemy?"

Ben let out a longsuffering sigh. "Why was Tiana attracted to Naveen? Or Romeo to Juliet?"

"Romeo killed himself." Audrey reminded him flatly.

"Okay, maybe he wasn't the best example, but really, I'm happy with her." Ben stopped the dance and took Audrey's hands. "I'm sorry. I know I hurt you and I know you had your hopes, and I'm sorry. But I think one day you'll find a really, really great guy, and you'll be happy with him."

Audrey squeezed Ben's hands. "I don't think I'll ever be happy without you." She sniffled. "Please… take me back. I swear I'll be a good queen. All those things… I can be kind and strong and bold too."

"Audrey," Ben let out a sigh. "I can't. She's my whole life now." He squeezed his old friend's hands. "I love her." He whispered.

Audrey looked absolutely baffled as Ben let her go and yawned again. "Goodbye, Audrey." He whispered.

It was unsettling. Ben glanced to the left. There was Sophia, and Lumiere, heading out of the room. To his right, his mom and dad sat on the couch, half reading, half admiring the tree and stealing small, knowing glances at their son. He sat in the center of them all, and to his right, there was an empty place. Someone was missing.

Belle reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Relax, dear," She whispered. "She'll be back soon."

"You realize," Adam announced, turning down a corner of a page in a book and smiling over to Ben. "That this is our last year doing a gift exchange as a family of three? Who would have thought so much would have changed last year?"
"It could be three again next year." Ben shrugged, wringing his hands together with a sour expression. His fingers were tingling. "Mal could leave for the Isle again." Or, even, Ben's parents could die. But still, he shrugged. "Four." He sighed. "Think it'll ever go up?"

His parents exchanged looks. He saw the way his mom's eyes lit up. "Maybe." Belle shrugged. "What do you have in mind?"

"Mal's friends," Ben admitted. "But… don't tell her. I'm trying to see if I can find their names so I can look into bringing them over, but I don't know if it'll work or be, you know, safe for Auradon, so it's still a work-in-progress."

"No kids?" Belle asked, deflating a tad. Adam elbowed his wife sharply in the arm.

"No." Ben frowned. "Mal's seventeen, mom. Sixteen, technically, for a few more weeks." He raised an eyebrow at her. "What are you trying to insinuate?" He demanded.

Belle raised her hands in acquiescence. "It just seemed like the most logical conclusion." She insisted. "I was only curious." She tilted her head to one side and examined her son. "Think they'd have purple hair?"

"Mom!" Ben's brow crumpled as he stared at his mom. "We're still waiting for the curse to be broken. After that, Mal and I won't be married anymore, remember?"

The thought struck a little black, cold feeling into his heart, but he stood his ground.

Belle nodded, shut her mouth, and leaned against Adam's chest. He ran his fingers through her hair, looking disappointed. Ben exhaled and stared at the tree. Mal's gifts remained underneath. About nine brightly-colored gifts. Some from Sophia, Lumiere, Stewart and the Fairy Godmother. One from both Belle and Adam, and two from Ben. The other two had come in the mail for her. Cards were attached, but Ben didn't know who they were from.

A week later, the new year passed. Ben found no joy in staying up to midnight as he still couldn't sleep. He would be awake for four to five days and then faint from sheer exhaustion only to start the process over again. The palace grounds were open past seven for the event, and reporters and normal people from Auradon City came up to celebrate. Palace servants and palace guards, including Sophia and Stewart, wandered the grounds and handed out sparklers and candies to small children.

At first, Ben hung out inside on the ground floor, leaning on a window and examining the party outside as kids ran back and forth across the grass with bright yellow sparks flying. Large coolers of water were laid out for them to dispose of the burnt sticks, though the gardeners would still collect the excess afterward.

Ben watched Lumiere and his sweetheart, Plumette, walk around the edge of the party. She was leaning on him heavily, but he didn't seem to mind as he smiled and talked with her.

His mom and Dad had seen the start of the party, stayed outside until the reporters showed up to start filming as the night grew darker and then decided to turn in early. Now, really, the only 'members' of the royal family outside were Sophia and Stewart.

Ben opened the door to the outside and slipped out. His appearance was met by cheers and calls. He waved with a tired smile to everyone around him, hoping that the bags under his eyes and his slumped demeanor wasn't too terribly obvious.

"King Ben!" Someone with a deep voice and tan skin at the base of the steps called as he began to
walk towards the crowds. "Can you spare a question or two for Auradon General News?"

Ben paused, blocked a yawn, and nodded. "I suppose I can spare one or two." He agreed.

"You're not escorting anyone tonight. Where's Queen Mal?" The reporter asked. He had a rather round nose that peeked over the top of his notepad as he hastily began to take notes in messy shorthand.

Ben groaned. "Well, maybe not those questions." He grumbled. "Mal doesn't really need an escort. She does her own thing. But she's not present tonight. She's in the moorlands for a month, and then she'll return to the palace."

The reporter nodded and mumbled under his breath as he finished writing. "Can I ask your thoughts on having her gone? Are things terribly different in the palace without the reigning queen being present?"

Ben stopped and stared at the man incredulously. He shoved his hands into his pockets to keep them from shaking. "I – um," He stuttered, and a cold feeling sank into his spine. "Yeah, things are definitely different. We, um, work is still getting done but…” He trailed off. What was he supposed to say?

The reporter tilted his head and closed his notepad. "Miss her terribly?" He asked in a softer tone.

Ben examined him as he tucked his pen into his pocket. He had the intense feeling that most of this question would, for once, be kept off the books. "Yeah." He admitted. "Life just… isn't really the same when she's not around. She usually makes lots of jokes and makes us laugh a lot, so the palace isn't as… happy. And I just miss talking to her, you know. It's like when your best friend goes on vacation and so you sit at home every day waiting for them to come home so you can hang out again."

The reporter nodded in understanding and flipped open his notepad again. "So, last question, I swear, what do you think of the party?"

Ben looked around at all their surroundings. Screams of excitement echoed around the gardens and people laughed to watch the children run by. "I'm really glad we do this every year." He yawned with a smile. "I just wish I had Mal here to see everything." The reporter nodded in sympathy, and Ben took a few steps back. A little girl screamed as she dashed behind him with sparks flying from her burning stick. Her mother hurried along behind her with another child, a toddler, on her hip. She didn't notice the King of Auradon chuckling as she passed him.

"Fifteen more seconds!" Someone screamed across the grounds. Everyone turned towards the source of the sound as a massive countdown began. "Ten… Nine… Eight!"

Ben spotted Sophia and Stewart. He stopped her as the countdown echoed across the grounds. As the shouts turned to "Five… Four… Three…” And on 'one', as fireworks were launched from the east and north sides on the palace grounds, Stewart pulled Sophia in and kissed her.

Ben watched her smile and watched her laugh, and pushed his hands deeper into his pockets, feeling exponentially more lonely as he watched Mal's best friend with her boyfriend. Bitter jealousy made him force his nails into his palms, and then he turned around and walked inside, to bed.

Mal's birthday passed on the seventeenth of January. There was no celebration of any sort aside from a few remarks of the importance of the date. Over dinner, Sophia stopped in and patted Ben's
shoulder. "Only fourteen more days." She whispered. "You're almost there."

"I hate the moorlands," Ben grumbled, pushing his plate away and burying his face in his arms. "I just want to scream."

Ben was sick of having her gone. He was so miserable he could barely hear his dad and Sophia chuckling.

"If she hadn't decided to stay the whole month, she'd be back by now." He grumbled.

"It's only a little while longer," Belle mumbled. Since Ben had snapped at her on Christmas, she'd been very careful not to mention Mal too much, but neither Ben nor Adam were fooled.

Adam drummed his fingertips together and cleared his throat. "What are you going to do after the curse is broken?"

Cry. Ben decided in his head, immediately. A lot. "I hope we'll stay in contact and still see each other." He mumbled. "I mean, the Isle and Auradon will probably continue to go back and forth a little more."

"You going to get remarried?" Belle asked in a whisper.

Ice raced down his spine. He sat back up, slowly, and stared straight ahead at the wall. He tried to imagine being married to someone besides Mal, even dating someone who wasn't the purple-haired queen and let out a long, steady breath.

"Maybe?" He shrugged. "I mean… I have to have a queen. For… eventually."

Belle and Adam both looked down at their plates, and Belle pushed hers away, looking absolutely sick. "Oh lord, what have we done?" She whispered.

"Belle," Adam began with a heavy sigh, but Ben's mom pushed her chair back and stood.

"Excuse me." She mumbled and turned to flee out of the room with a hand pressed over her mouth as tears started to fall from her eyes.

Adam threw his napkin down and stood. "Pardon." He sighed, and followed Belle out the door she'd vanished out of.

Sophia stood behind Ben for a few minutes, and then quietly left the room without another word. Ben put his head in his hands and closed his eyes. He drummed his fingernails on the table and then hummed. "I know you." He whispered. "I walked with you once upon a dream. I know you; that gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam."

His eyelids grew heavy, and he saw purple flying in his vision even though his eyes were closed. "But if I know you, I know what you'll do, you'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a… dream."

He felt himself blacking out, falling forward, hitting the table, and falling into a restless sleep.

A month after their first meeting, Ben received a text from the Fairy Godmother. "We can't find anything, but there are many parts of the spell that are hidden. We'll have to wait until Mal returns to determine if it is spell-related or not."

Which was fabulous, because she was basically telling him that he was stuck.
Most days, his head felt like it was going to split open every time he saw the sun. Most nights, he lay awake thinking about what Mal was doing in the moors. Part of him hoped she was getting plenty of rest. The other part of him was hoping she was going through the same problem so that they could both fall asleep together for three consecutive days before going about their lives. A very, very small part was worried he'd never actually get a full night's rest again, even if Mal came back. But that was just unrestful thinking.

Finally, in the morning on January thirty-first, he received a message from Mal. "Hey!" It read. "Just left the moors. Now we know that cell service does NOT work inside the borders… yet. ;) Be home soon."

What a relief.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast(1991 &2017), Big Hero Six, Meet the Robinsons, Bambi, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Cinderella(1950 &2015), Mulan, Alice in Wonderland, Frozen, the Princess and the Frog, or Romeo and Juliet.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Mal returns from the moorlands. Ben's sleeplessness and her hand rot are reversed without consequence. Ericka speaks with her mother.

MAJOR FORESHADOWING --> One single line of Mal's dialogue point to something very important that will happen later on. See if you can spot it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The gas station had bright, vibrant green and red wooden signs hanging inside the windows, advertising a variety of drinks and snacks. There was rust on the edges of the nozzles and the button for the call attendant was taped over with brown duct tape. Mal stepped out of the car, closed the door, and pulled the green gas card out of her pocket.

The lot was empty, but it was a relatively small place she was passing through anyway. A semi-truck was parked along the length of the lot, shielding her from the highway, and two cars, one blue and one black, were parked in front of the entrance to the shop. She could also glimpse a red truck bed poking out from the side of the building.

Mal swiped the card, punched in the palace code, and then flipped open the cap on the side of the car. As she twisted to lid to the fuel tank, she heard a sound like screws rolling on a metal tabletop and then watched the car shift forward as a shadow brushed her feet. They were the spurs on someone's boots. That someone was now leaning on her car.

"Hey, honey," the person – a man – purred as she rolled her eyes, took the nozzle, and began filling up her tank. "Nice hair." He continued, ignoring how she'd remained silent. "Are you trying to mimic her highness?"

At this, Mal flipped her hair, tossing her hair over her shoulder, and stared at him incredulously. He was a large man, maybe three inches taller than Ben, and very heavy. A cowboy with a plaid shirt tucked into blue jeans and, yes, spurs on his boots. And he recognized her immediately.

"Oh, Sh-" He exclaimed, stumbling and sliding right off of the hood of the car, where he'd been leaning. "Sh-oot! Your Highness, I did not – I'm sorry!"

Mal burst into laughter as she watched him crab crawl a few feet away from her, looking whiter than paper. He tried to get his feet underneath him as he backed away even quicker. Mal wrapped her arms around her chest as her ribs began to ache and slumped against the car as he got to his feet, backing away.

Mal could barely walk straight as she locked the door from the outside and headed towards the gas station. Inside, she retrieved a bubbly, light green Auradon drink for the road and took it up to the register, pulling her new thick, dark brown gloves up her hands as she put it down on the register and brushed her bangs in front of her face a little.

"This all for you, miss?" The man behind the cash register asked.
"Yes, thank you," Mal replied as she pulled her card back out. He scanned the drink, and she extended the card for him to take. As his fingers appeared in her field of vision, green magic flared up on her skin like a faulty electrical field. There was a snap and a sizzle, and the poor man yanked his hand back with a yell, waving it as a smell of earth and the forest appeared in the shop.

"I am so sorry!" Mal exclaimed, waving her own hand as tingles ran up her arms. "I am so, so-

"It's fine." He gasped, squeezing his eyes shut and taking deep breaths. "It's – it's – you're the queen."

Mal flinched. "I, um, how about I slide it to you?" She asked, ignoring the question as the poor cashier stared at her, still waving his arm as she put the card down with a wince. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to shock you."

"That's… f-fine." The cashier stuttered. "Happens all the time, I mean, it doesn't but – I can't believe I didn't recognize you." He picked up the card carefully with his other hand and swiped it through a card reader. "A-are you passing through?" He asked.

"Yes, is your hand alright?" Mal asked.

"It just – tingles." The cashier breathed. He made to hand her card back to her, but then thought better of it and slid it carefully across the countertop. Mal picked it up and felt more electricity crackle at the proximity of the other person. She swallowed and picked up her drink.

"Do you want your receipt?" The cashier asked, pulling it off the printer and putting it down on the counter. Mal nodded and picked it up.

"I'm sorry again." She frowned. "It... should stop tingling soon." The cashier nodded as he continued flexing his hand and waving his fingers, and then Mal stepped away and headed to the door. She replaced the nozzle and unlocked her car. As she pulled on the handle, more green electricity flared up on her hands.

It was a magical side effect, she'd been told. It hadn't been so bad in the moorlands, but now that she'd left the magical land, she seemed to be practically made of lightning. She pulled off the glove. Her fingers and the entire underlying side of her hand had black rot crawling underneath her skin. The same thing stretched up her legs and covered the backs of her ears. It didn't hurt, but it looked horrible and made moving hard. It had been on her hand ever since the third night at the moors and should – should – go away as soon as she returned to the palace. It was just her mother's way of reminding her wayward daughter that Maleficent Senior was still expecting to be released from the Isle of the Lost. The palace hadn't sent for her, so she assumed that Ben was either not dealing with any side-effects, or they were minor enough that Belle and Adam hadn't freaked out and demanded she return. The rot didn't affect her magic either. Really, it just took away from her motility.

Mal replaced the gloves, put on her sunglasses, and let out a breath. She turned the key in the ignition and smiled as a song came to life on the radio. She felt absolutely chipper as she put the car into gear and pulled out of the station. Only an hour to the palace now.

It had snowed at the moors. Some area turned frigid blue and purples where you needed coats, and other places the snow resembled tropical sands in shades of reds and oranges. She'd spent her days explaining Auradon to the outsiders and receiving stories of Maleficent in return. Species which had faded away or left were returning now, and a large anti-Auradon climate was settling in. Many creatures were angry for the barrier restrictions, and then there was the subject of the Isle of the Lost itself…. On the bright side, she'd experimented plenty with her magic, which left her feeling
refreshed and happy.

She pulled back into the palace just before eight. A small crowd of people was waiting for her. She assumed they'd been tracking her cell phone. Mal shut the engine off and stowed the keys in the center console. She opened the door and stood up. Ben, who was wearing a knit vest over a long-sleeve plaid shirt, moved to walk around the car and take her hand. She felt like something was being pulled out of her hands and they became infinitely easier to move. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck to take a quick, unnoticeable inhale. Then, she dug her toe into the slush around the edge of the road and smiled up at him. He looked tired like he'd had a hard month of work, but he smiled at her. Her sunglasses made his blue eyes looked hazel.

"Hi." She smiled, and they shared a quick peck. She detached and hugged everyone else: Belle, Adam, Sophia, Lumiere, and Stewart. Ben shut her door behind her and leaned against the car, watching her.

"How was the drive?" Lumiere asked after he'd gotten his hug.

"It was great." Mal gave two thumbs-up. "Ten-and-a-half hours there and back, and now I know every single Christmas song, so Ben and I will have to have a challenge." She winked at him, and he laughed. Mal's cheeks turned a little pink as she continued: "Oh, and this guy tried to compliment my hair and was like: 'You're cute, are you trying to mimic the queen?' And when I turned around, he fell off the car and it was hilarious." Mal took her suitcase from Lumiere with a dazzling smile and began to lead them up the sidewalk. "The Fae people told me all sorts of stories about my mother, so now Ben and I really need to see Maleficent so that I can compare accounts." Mal laughed, and then suddenly remembered she'd left something in the car. "And I brought things for you all!" She stopped mid-stride and dashed back to the car, leaving her suitcase behind. She opened the passenger-side door and withdrew what looked like a leather satchel. The outside chill turned her cheeks turned red as she sprinted back to them. "Once we get inside, I'll hand everything out," She decided as she slung the strap over her shoulder.

"We should go up to the family room," Adam suggested. "So that Mal can open her own gifts. Sophia, Lumiere and Stewart, you're welcome to join us." He nodded to the three servants, who smiled. Stewart slipped an arm around Sophia's shoulders.

"Can I drop my suitcase off by our door first?" Mal asked, flexing her fingers inside the gloves experimentally.

"Yeah. We can meet you there." Belle answered. She slipped an arm around Mal's shoulder as they walked side-by-side and squeezed. "It's so good to have you home!" She exclaimed, glancing over her shoulder to where Ben was walking closer to the back of the group.

Lumiere opened the door for everyone. Belle and Mal walked in together, followed by Sophia and Stewart, holding hands. Ben and Adam followed with Lumiere bringing up the line. Most of the group continued to the family room as Sophia and Mal ran up to her and Ben's room to drop off her suitcase.

In the family room, Ben slumped into a chair. Adam sat next to him on the couch. "Doesn't seem like she lost any sleep," Adam commented.

Ben nodded wearily. "I'm not going to mention it to her right now. She's super excited about everything. She's not like that often." He smiled softly. "If it's still like this after tonight and nothing changes, I'll let her know. I'm secretly hoping its curse stuff, and everything will be normal after this."
"Didn't Fairy Godmother say she couldn't find anything?" Adam asked.

"Yes, but just because she couldn't find it doesn't mean it can't be that." Ben reasoned. "And the entire thing is so strange... the timing, the symptoms..." Ben trailed off and stifled a yawn. He'd gotten pretty good at mostly ignoring how tired he was.

Lumiere shuffled the presents under the tree into better view. They'd left the tree up, awaiting Mal's return. The snowflakes still hung, and the ornaments still twinkled. Belle smiled at Mal's dragon hanging a few inches from Ben's birds and then took a seat on her favorite couch.

Sophia opened the door so Mal could slip in. Her satchel was still slung around her arm, and the gloves still pulled up snugly alongside her sleeves. The rot had retreated but still lingered in faint shadows. The purplette went to sit beside Belle, but Ben caught her hand as she walked past and guided her to sit on the floor in front of him, where he began to massage her shoulders. Sophia sat beside Belle instead.

"Get everything settled?" Lumiere asked, sitting in a chair beside the tree so he could hand things towards her.

"No, we just dropped it off and hung up my coat and put away my shoes," Mal explained with a shrug, giving her sock feet an experimental wiggle. "I'll put everything else away later."

Lumiere nodded. "Sounds good." He said and handed Mal a brightly colored package speckled with Christmas trees. "Here. That one is from me."

Mal opened the package carefully and unveiled a pair of golden bracelets. "Thank you, Lumiere." She smiled brightly. She slid them onto her wrists as Lumiere handed her a package from Stewart.

Mal made sure to read off the name of each person before she opened them and carefully arranged the paper scraps into a pile so that she could easily put them into the furnace. Sophia gave her a pair of warm slippers like Ben's, and Stewart gave her a sketchpad for drawing, and the two mystery packages turned out to be from Aurora, who gave her a warm blanket made of plush, and the Methodist group from Andalusia, who had given her a knitted hat and a pair of socks with dragons on them. Mal liked them a lot.

When Lumiere picked up Belle and Adam's gift, he didn't read the tag off. He handed it to Mal with a sly smile and watched as she searched the paper for the names. "From..." Mal squinted and then choked. Ben leaned forward to see what had her worked up. "From mom and dad." She sniffled. "Thank you, Belle and Adam." Inside was a portable radio with a powerful speaker. Mal set it beside her thigh like a delicate treasure and took several deep breaths before continuing. Ben glanced at his parents. Belle avoided his eyes.

Ben's two gifts were opened with great trepidation and dramatic effect. One contained a pretty necklace with a rectangular pendant that rotated around to reveal a small, pointed blade she could easily hide in her hand. The other contained a pair of black leather fingerless gloves with metal decorative clips. Mal smiled but didn't put them on. She didn't want everyone to see the rot under her fingertips.

Then, she reached inside her pouch. "Keep in mind this Christmas gift-giving thing is pretty new to me, and also that I didn't have access to wrapping paper like the rest of you." Mal cautioned as she opened the top. Ben rolled his eyes as his fingertips rested on her shoulders for a quick second.

The first item Mal pulled out was a silver mirror for Sophia with her name stamped into the back of it. As she handed it to her, Mal explained: "The Pixies showed me how to enchant it. It can teach
you new tricks and tips if you ask it since I know you like doing beauty stuff." Sophia accepted it happily.

Stewart received a pair of sunglasses and a pair of warm, protective gloves made of some sort of lizard's skin. Lumiere was given a watch that could keep track of things he asked it to remember and alert him when they were coming up.

The next two things Mal withdrew were two large, white, pear-shaped jewels with a cluster of rubied cherries each. These she handed to Belle and Adam with a flush. "I couldn't think of anything to give you, so I hope you'll like these?" She asked shyly.

Belle and Adam were astounded. "Are these the fruits that grow in the moors?" Adam asked as he examined his cherries. The delicate stems had been preserved with the rest of the fruit, with nary a crack or a scratch on them.

"Yeah," Mal answered. She elbowed Ben in the knee and lifted up a treasure from the large satchel to him – a black, circular river stone with an indent in the center, about as large as a plate. It was heavy and smooth from constant running water surrounding it.

"This is interesting," Ben said as he examined it. It was almost like a bowl, only a little bigger and not as deep.

"There's a catch," Mal said with a smirk. "It's from the bottom of the blue lagoon. If you fill it with water, you can talk to me in the moors, almost like a phone call."

"Blasphemous," Ben said, though a smile was stretching across his face. "You better not be lying." He warned her.

"Ha, ha." She smiled and curled into his legs as he turned it over, examining it. Belle watched his happy smile and the way Mal closed her eyes and rested her hands on his feet, and then looked away a little. Sophia cleared her throat.

"Hey, I don't think it's been mentioned that this girl is now seventeen!" The black-haired girl announced. "Happy late birthday!"

Mal opened an eye as everyone cheered a little in agreement. "Thank you." Mal smiled widely. "I feel an entire year older now."

"Are we going to sing?" Stewart asked, sitting upright in a chair by the door. His new sunglasses were propped up on his head. He winked playfully at Mal. Ben set the basin aside carefully and leaned down to take her hand.

"Sing?" Mal asked, looking confused as Ben squeezed her hand through the gloves.

"1 – 2 – 3!" Ben counted, raising his free arm above his head as if he were conducting a band.

"Happy birthday to you!" The room exploded into sound. "Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Mal, happy birthday to you!"

Mal laughed. She shook her head and laid her head on Ben's knees. "Beautiful." She announced. "Now I'm definitely an entire year older."

"I think I'm a year older too," Stewart said, sticking a finger in his ear with a playful wince. "Whoever was making that bullfrog noise has deafened me."
"Hey." Adam frowned from across the room, and everyone burst into laughter. Mal glanced up at Ben, laughing as warm feelings rose up in her chest. Ben yawned, leaned down, and kissed her head before he squeezed her hand tightly. Mal squeezed back, ignoring the tingling feeling of the disappearing rot in her hands as Ben leaned back into his chair. It was all he could do to stay awake.

"Want to stay up late and watch Maleficent?" Mal asked as she and Ben walked into their room early at eight-thirty. She slipped out from under his arm and went into the bedroom to change into some pajamas. Ben didn't notice her slip her glove halfway off, and then slip the rest of it off with a careful breath. Only some small black shadows remained on her finger joints.

Ben stifled a groan with a yawn. "I dunno, Mal. I'm exhausted. I just want to go to bed."

"Oh." Mal nodded, reappearing from her closet and straightening a pajama shirt on her frame. "I feel wide awake, so I might stay up in the other room for a little bit. That okay?"

Ben twisted his hands. If his theory was correct, and his sleeplessness was spell-related, then he'd need Mal nearby to fall asleep. He wasn't sure if that meant proximity of arm's reach or proximity of on palace grounds. "We can stay up and talk about the moors if you want." He sighed. "I want to hear about everything – how much magic are you learning?"

Mal frowned. "I mean – you practically saw it all in November. I get to do lots of magic, of course, but I'm mainly doing culture explaining and telling everyone about Auradon. They're really surprised to hear about the Isle of the Lost. They thought it was pretty, well – evil of Auradon." She stopped in her musings and began to chew her hair a little. She turned to Ben with downcast eyes. "One of the evilest things they've ever done." She clarified. "I didn't tell them much about what it was like on the Isle or the unspeakable punishments Auradon inflicted. They thought just the idea was evil."

Shame filled Ben. "Mal-" He started, but she brushed past him. Her good mood had evaporated. She slipped into bed, her previous idea of staying up gone. Ben had accomplished his goal of keeping her in the room, but she looked so sad he regretted it. He turned the lights down as Mal flipped her lamp on on her side of the bed. She opened her phone and sent a message as Ben sat down on his side of the bed and pulled the covers over his legs.

Mal reached down between the bed frame and the nightstand and withdrew the satchel that had held her treasures from the moors. She withdrew another mirror like the one she had given Sophia, only the back of this one was intricately engraved with mushrooms, flowers, grass and trees, all centered around a raised apple. A name was engraved in the handle – Evie.

Three rocks with holes worn through them naturally and pretty silken ribbons were withdrawn next. One ribbon was blue, the next brown, and the last red. They were magical talismans. The last offering she pulled out was three coils of copper wire and a small collection of mechanical pieces and parts in a sealed plastic baggie with 'Carlos' written on the front. Mal smoothed out the satchel and Ben glimpsed a name stitched in red in the side of the handle. It read: Jay.

"What's all that?" He asked.

Mal didn't answer for several seconds – long enough to make Ben wonder if she was trying to ignore him. Finally, she sighed and brushed a hand over the satchel. "They're gifts. For… my friends at the Isle." She paused. "I know you said not to try to contact them, but I miss them so much, and I figure if I send them things without a note, they'll have the sense to hide it from my mother and… they won't think I've forgotten them."
Ben didn't know what to say. "Will, um, they be mad that you're not going to be... breaking the barrier over the Isle of the Lost?" He asked. Mal sighed and shrugged. Be reached over and patted her shoulder. "You do what you think is best, but please – be careful." He advised.

Mal nodded. "Has there been any news on the construction?" She asked softly.

"Walls are almost done," Ben said. "Not much else. They sent a list, but I didn't examine it too much." He paused. "You know what? I need to give you something." He climbed out of bed and hurried into the other room. He bustled through the living room and quickly found his Mom's calligraphy gift where he'd left it – on a side table.

He returned and handed the denser paper to Mal. She unfolded it and smiled when she recognized the words. Then, she frowned. The air grew frosty in a way it hadn't since Mal had first come from the Isle. Two black bumps materialized out of her head, but she took a deep breath and they faded again.

"You are not a normal queen." Mal read softly. Her face twisted. Ben wondered what she was thinking. "Fear not about never seeing those you have left behind and whom you miss. You will have the opportunity to reconnect and rebuild." She set the paper down and twiddled her thumbs.

"Ben, am I a bad queen to Auradon?" Mal's question caught him so off-guard he had to hesitate for a few seconds. Was she not going to comment at all on the line: "your marriage and your strong relationship with your husband will one day be your greatest achievement"? That was the thing he was curious about....

"I don't think so..." Ben trailed off. "Personally, he didn't think he was the best king to Auradon, so he didn't see how she, the secondary monarch who was also running two separate kingdoms while also serving as acting queen to Auradon could be considered 'bad'.

"I haven't done anything for them yet," Mal said. "And, I originally thought that that line might be talking about my friends on the Isle, but I just remembered Aurora. I healed relationships with her. And this second line right after it says: You will also have the opportunity to correct many of the grievances caused by your mother, Maleficent, and the heroes of Auradon. Heroes of Auradon is probably the Isle of the Lost and the moors, but my mother caused the most damage in Auradon. The place I happen to be the queen of." Mal huffed in thought. A strand of purple hair attached to her lips as she thought, and she started to subconsciously chew it as she considered. Ben reached over and pulled it out of her face.

"Mal, it's only been three months, and two of those months you spent in the moors." Ben reasoned. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

Someone opened the door in the other room. A second later, Sophia called: "Mal?"

"In here!" Mal called.

There were footsteps, and Sophia opened the door with a large cardboard box in hand. Four different kinds and colors of wrapping paper stuck out the top. Ben recognized it – it was the wrapping supplies.

Sophia set the box down at the end of the bed as Mal swung her legs over the bedside. "Thanks, Sophia." She said with a smile.

"Do you have tape?" Sophia asked, straightening up the box's contents.

"Yes." Mal nodded. "Thank you, Sophia."
"No problem." Sophia started to edge out of the room. "See you tomorrow."

"See you," Mal answered, sounding distracted as she shuffled through bows and plastic wrapping.

The door closed in the other room and Ben fought to keep his eyes open as he snuggled deeper into the covers. It was like the cotton was reaching to pull him down into the embrace of darkness and quiet. It was nice to be fighting to keep his eyes open, rather than to shut them as he had been for the month.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Mal." He yawned. "It's only been three months. You've already done more than my parents have in the last five years. It's okay."

There was no answer, so he yawned once more and closed his eyes. He drifted off into a deep sleep almost immediately, completely missing Mal's whisper of: "No, it's not."

Ben woke up the next morning to his phone buzzing a steady stream of vibrations. He lay in bed as it vibrated. For the first time in a month and a half, he felt entirely refreshed and contented. His eyes didn't feel like they weighed entire pounds, and his muscles didn't ache. He smiled as he sat up. This proved a point, though. His sleeplessness was curse related, and that meant it could be contained.

He rolled onto his back and reached a hand to his side, searching for Mal's body. His smile faded somewhat to see that she was gone. He'd slept past her, and that rarely happened. He sat up, still feeling relieved to be wakeful and energized, and noticed the box Sophia had brought was gone. Mal's gifts for her friends on the Isle were covered and wrapped and stacked beside the door. They weren't very neat, but the effort showed clearly.

Ben picked up his phone. Doug was calling. He answered and held the phone to his ear.

"Good morning Doug." He greeted as he stretched one arm at a time. "How can I help you?"

"Hey, ah, Ben. I, just, did you just wake up?" Doug's voice came through the phone crackly and hushed.

"Yeah," Ben admitted, swinging his legs out of bed and moving to the closet for some fresh clothes. "Why?"

"Well, I'm just wondering what I should do with these letters that are coming in for Mal," Doug said. There was the distinct sound of paper sliding off a desk. Doug yelped. "Sorry- sorry, those were just my computer manuals. We're having – technical difficulties with one of our systems. Anyway, I've just got a lot, and she doesn't have a PO box that I know of."

"Letters?" Ben asked. He got lots of letters, of course. Most were handled by a castle assistant, but he didn't know of very many people who would write to the unofficial queen.

"Yeah," Doug confirmed. "There's a good five dozen."

"Huh." Ben hummed as he pulled a light blue, long-sleeved shirt off a hangar. "I can ask Mal what she wants and get back to you. She's busy, but I honestly don't know what she'd want done with them. Can you have them screened to make sure they're not dangerous?"

"Yes. Kay, thank you, Ben. Have a nice day." Doug said through gritted teeth as the thuds of heavy paperback books came through the line.
"Have a nice day-" Ben started to say before the line went dead. Ben stared at his phone for a few seconds, and then shrugged it off. Doug was one of the busiest men he knew. He could respect feeling like you never had enough time.

Ben got dressed and glanced at the clock. Seven-thirty. Not ridiculously late either. He headed downstairs, snagged two muffins and some fruit from the kitchens, and headed up to his office. He dumped all of his load on his desk except for a single muffin and began the route to his wife's office.

Mal had a headphone in one ear and an earpiece in the other as she worked. She appeared to be on the phone with someone but smiled and waved her fingers at him when she saw him walk in before her face twisted into a frown. "There should not be any Auradon children on the Isle." She told the person on the other end of the phone. The hairs on Ben's neck stood up straight and he sent her an incredulous look. Mal waved at him to come closer. He took a few steps forward and she broke off a piece of his muffin and popped it into her mouth as she listened. Ben rolled his eyes and set it down, still gazing concernedly in the direction of her earpiece.

"Okay, I misunderstood. Got it." Mal nodded. "I'm going to bring some Moorish people to help clean up the land after the barrier is modified. Can you tell me the dimensions of the beach we blocked out?" She reached for a pen, clicked it, and began scribbling. Ben looked around the room and leaned against her desk as she continued working. Mal flipped open a paper file on her desk and opened a blueprint spread on her tablet as she listened to the other person talk. After a long pause, she said: "That matches what I have here. As far as I know, we're starting with forty, nine, and twelve, right?"

There was a pause. "Great, splendid." She nodded. "I'm planning on taking a quick trip out as soon as the walls are done to make sure everything is going well and to see all the people who've been helping us."

Ben drummed his fingers on his knee as he waited. Mal broke off another piece of muffin and rolled her eyes.

"I would move it up, but unfortunately there are a few other things in my life that need to take precedence," Mal answered. She opened a word document and started typing up a quick statement. She snorted. "Believe it or not. I do have a little list, though." She picked up a piece of paper carelessly so she could transcribe it, and continued talking. "I need the moors to be open to Auradon so that the disaffiliation against magic starts to go away, I have a list of things that need to be completed on the Isle for the actual people and not just the future city site, and above all…" She met Ben's eyes. "I need to also focus on being a wife and Auradon's queen."

Silence filled the room. Ben was genuinely touched. After all, Mal hadn't exactly started out with this end in mind. He remembered for a second the short, ratty-haired girl in dirty leather who'd stepped out of the limo back when Stewart had first brought her to Auradon, and discovered he had a rather hard time putting her together with the long-haired girl in front of him, who held his gaze evenly and let a small, sexy smirk pull at her lips. Had it really only been six months? It felt like two years.

Mal laughed. "Uh-huh, sounds good. Hey, I've got to go now. His royal nerdiness wants my attention, so I've got to make sure it's not important. Let me know if anything happens, okay? Thank you. Bye."

She tapped the side of her earpiece and yanked out her earbud. A loud blaring could be heard from it. It sounded like screaming for a few seconds, and then Ben realized it was actually Christmas music.
"How can you even hear with your music that loud?" Ben asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I am determined to learn every word of your Auradon Christmas songs." Mal shrugged.

"Why?" He snorted.

"Because." She chuckled. "What did you need, Ben?"

"Doug is wondering what you want to be done with all of the letters you're getting," Ben answered. He was still reeling over what she'd told the person on the other side of the phone.

"Letters?" Mal asked with a raised eyebrow as she flipped a lock of dark purple hair over her shoulder and grabbed a piece of the muffin. He watched the purple strands land over her shoulder in slow motion, and then jolted his gaze back to her eyes.

"Yeah, sometimes people write to the king and queen." He explained, folding his hands together. "Little kids and politically-driven people, the works."

Mal's hand landed on the desk. She froze, looking at the computer, and then looked up at Ben with a quizzical eye. "Little kids… write to us?" She asked softly. She seemed absolutely stunned by that revelation.

"Yeah." Ben softened his voice. "And sometimes we do little school visits and things like that."

Mal bit her cheek, and Ben swallowed. "I don't actually answer most of the time, because I get so many, but I get them all the time."

Mal stared at him. "You don't answer them?" She asked.

"Oh, they get an answer!" Ben exclaimed. "The castle attendants usually send out this pre-written response of 'Thank you for writing, etc, etc'."

This answer seemed to make Mal even more cross. "I'll take all my letters." She said, shuffling a folder to find her phone underneath it. "Doug can just direct them all to me."

Ben stared. "Um, Mal, he says you already have, like, five dozen. And if they keep coming in, there's no way you can read and respond to all of them."

Mal tapped her fingers on the desk and exhaled. Then she looked up and met his gaze again. Her eyes had taken on their laser-like green tint. "Challenge accepted, Ben." She flicked his nose with a smirk and pulled a spreadsheet from a drawer in her desk.

"No, no it's not a challenge!" Ben rolled his eyes. "You actually cannot. It's not physically possible."

Mal picked up a file folder full of blueprints from the Isle and met his eyes as she recited: "Read it fast at lightning speed; remember everything I need." Immediately, the paper lit up at her words and Mal glanced down and began skimming the page's surface. Ben scowled.

"Well, not all of us have magic." He sighed as she finished the first two pages and continued on to the third, leaning over to continue typing as she worked.

"You've got your own special kind of magic." Mal hummed in response as she read.

"Like what?" Ben raised an eyebrow.

Quicker than he could blink, Mal leaned up and kissed the side of his mouth before she sat back
down and continued reading. "You're cute." She told him, by way of explanation. Her strawberry-flavored chapstick clung to the right side of his mouth.

Ben took her chin and kissed her cheek softly. "I missed having you around." He whispered. "I'm glad you're back."

Mal canceled her reading spell and stood up slowly. "Me too." She smiled. "It's kind of... good to be back." Ben leaned into her as he felt her breath rush past his collar.

"Mal-" His mouth felt dry. He swallowed, and then backed off. "I need to tell you about the Christmas party. We missed having you there."

"Who else was there?" Mal asked, setting a hand on her hip.


"The Snow Queen?" Mal asked. "Sounds like someone I'd get along with."

"She has magical powers," Ben informed her with a smile. "You have lots in common."

Mal's mouth dropped open. She stared at Ben incredulously. "I thought you said I was the first royal with magic?" She asked.

"The first head royal," Ben explained. "Our monarchy is above all the other monarchies. We're the federal monarchy. And you're the first person with magic." He tapped his hands on his knees and frowned a little. "Elsa doesn't go out of Arendelle, well, ever. But Ericka, her daughter, was there. I spoke to her a little, but Ericka is really... reclusive. Like her mom. She doesn't reach out much."

"Unkind?" Mal asked with a frown.

"No." Ben shook his head. "But... it's complicated. When Ericka was eight, her mom announced her to the kingdom. It was this huge scandal. I remember it even though I was only seven or so. No one outside of Arendelle had known about Ericka, and no one even knows who her dad is or anything. She just... appeared?" He shrugged. "Anyways. All the drama left a bad mark on Ericka. She travels lots, doesn't talk to people, and is generally one of the most secretive royals out there, after her mom and, well, us."

Mal snorted. "Yeah. We don't exactly focus on being open with our subjects, huh?" And she frowned deeply as if that statement made her angry. Her fists turned into little balls at her sides, and Ben got the feeling she was wishing she could do something about it.

"Yeah, well..." Ben sighed and stood up. "I'm going to go up to my office. I just wanted to come to say good morning before I went up." He set his hands on her desk as he stood up.

Mal frowned. "Can I... can we, no, wait." She stumbled over her words and grumbled in frustration at herself. "Can I have a kiss before you head out?" She asked.

Ben smiled. "Course." He agreed. They stood still for a second, and then he leaned in, and she met him halfway. They shared a quick kiss over the desk, and then she smiled as she sat back down.

"I like doing that." She mumbled a little, brushing her fingertips over her lips like they were tingling. Ben turned a bit pink and chuckled.

"Me too." He laughed. "I'll, um, see you later, okay?"
Okay." Mal chuckled. She watched him turn and leave, and then let out a little exhilarated breath. What would her friends think, if they saw her like this? What would her mom think? Here she was, kissing the king of Auradon, re-sculpting the Isle of the Lost, and acting as if she were some sort of star-struck princess.

Oh, her mother would kill her if she knew what was going on here.

Knock, knock, knock. She stopped what she was doing, setting the fake bugs she was planning on planting in the living room lampshades beside her latest prank – a pack of gum that had been replaced with play dough that she'd conveniently leave on the kitchen counter for one of her cousins – or better, her aunt – to find and made sure they were tucked out of sight.

"Enter." She called.

The door to her room opened and a rush of warmth entered the room as a servant appeared, shivering from the intense cold wave that had rushed out. The frost on the bottom of her door frame began to melt.

"P-princess Ericka." The servant's teeth chattered. "Your m-mother would like to see you in her sitting room. It'll only take a moment."

"Okay." Ericka nodded. She pulled her gloves on from where she'd left them on a side table and left her shoes beside the door as she walked out. The servant pulled the door closed behind her and let out a breath as warm air circulated around them. Central heating was very important to the Arendelle royal family.

Ericka rolled her sleeves up and began to walk – barefoot – to her mother's sitting room. Her cousins and their parents raced around from room to room, screaming and cheering as they went. She climbed on the banister to get past without being knocked over and then slid down the staircase on her butt to feel the wind rush through her braid.

She picked her way through the corridors until she came to the sitting room. The door was cracked open and she could see her mother's legs propped up on an ottoman with the scary ice heels melting a little with the heat of the fire in the room. Her little sister was playing on the floor.

Ericka opened the door and smiled as her mom looked up from Economics in Auradon, Volume Seven. "Hey, Mom." She smiled.

"Hello, snowflake." Elsa smiled, sitting up a little and dropping her legs off the ottoman. "Thank you for coming down to see me."

"No problem." Ericka shrugged, looking around the room anxiously. "Is dad back yet?" She asked.

Elsa's smile grew a bit tight. "No, snowflake. He's not yet. But maybe soon."

Ericka deflated. She looked away, out the window to where she could see the silver light of the moon bouncing off the thick layers of snow outside. She glared at the light as if it were the moon's fault her dad wasn't coming home tonight either. She saw her mom gesture to a chair beside her and walked over to sit down. Frost formed in her wake.

"What did you think of King Ben when you saw him last Christmas?" Elsa asked, setting her book to the side and smoothing out her icy skirt, even as the edges began to melt.

"King Ben?" Ericka's brow furrowed. "Mom, I don't need you setting me up with anyone. And
Geesh, he's married!" She could swear, just because she'd split things off with Tyler didn't mean she needed any boys in her life. Unless it was her dad. He was an exception. And maybe Uncle Kristoff and Olaf. But really, she just wished her dad would come back already. Secret or no secret, she was tired of never having her family together in one place.

"I'm not trying to set you up." Elsa reprimanded in a stern tone, frowning deeply. "What was he like? Stubborn? Stuck up?"

Ericka blinked. "No. No, I've talked to Ben lots and he's just… chill. He's one of those people who likes everyone and who everyone likes." Ericka leaned back into the chair as she focused on what Ben had looked like in their brief conversation. "He was exhausted. Just flat out tired. Could barely keep his eyes open."

"Well, he was just finishing his first official month as King." Elsa reasoned. "What did he think of you? Was he hostile? Did he make any comments on your magic?"

Ericka furrowed her brow. "No, not hostile." She explained. "But he did say that… he wouldn't mind if someone started a snowstorm outside."

Elsa pursed her lips together in a deep frown. Ericka tried to remember anything else. "He asked after you. But that was it." She folded her legs on top of the seat and pulled her skirt to cover herself as her mother delved into thought.

"And you didn't hear anything else from him?" Elsa asked after a long pause. Ericka shook her head, then hesitated. Elsa raised an eyebrow.

"Just rumors," Ericka mumbled. "People talk. We know how that is."

"And what are they talking about?" Elsa asked.

"Him. His life. His job. His wife." Ericka listed, counting on her fingers sarcastically.

"Tell me everything you heard," Elsa commanded, arching her back into the sofa a little. Ericka raised her eyebrows at her mom. Elsa was known for being reclusive and uncaring about politics. She didn't understand why her mom was so into the rumors all of a sudden.

"Why?" She asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." Elsa shook her head and hesitated. "The queen – the new one – she wasn't there, was she?"

"No." Ericka shook her head. "I heard Belle and Adam said she was visiting her other kingdom."

"And what's she like?" Elsa asked.

Ericka frowned and curled her toes a little. "Mysterious. No one knows that much about her. Beast's family hasn't really taken her anywhere though. People say she's powerful, aloof, sarcastic, smart, and funny, but no one has really had the chance to talk with her yet." She drummed her fingers in her lap. "She's magical." She added, and her mother nodded in agreement.

"What else did you hear?" Elsa whispered. "Good and bad."

"Well, there's always a lot of bad." Ericka hummed. "Rumors have it she's trying to bring her mom over, and also that she's pregnant. Some people think the reason Ben was so tired is that she's poisoning him. Other people think Ben is controlling her to gain the sympathy of the people, and
some people think Belle and Adam forced the entire thing to gain better control over their son, the villains, and the future of the kingdom." She let out a deep breath and rolled her eyes, then hesitated. "His friends were talking about her. They think he's actually in love with her. That it's not a spell. They repeated something he said: 'I need my best friend back'. So, I think that it's a real thing, and they're actually choosing each other and not being thrown together. But, of course, Auradon wants their story."

Ericka sat back in her chair and picked a little at her nails, having made her points. Elsa folded her hands across her lap and frowned across the room where the painting of her parents, Ericka's grandparents, hung. "But then why did they rush it?" She mumbled. "And with Ben and Audrey?" Elsa hummed and nodded. "Thank you, Ericka. That's all I needed unless you have anything else you can tell me."

Ericka shook her head and got to her feet. She wrung her hands and hesitated at the side of her mother's couch as Elsa propped her legs back up on the ottoman, cryptic look frozen on her face. Snowflakes appeared around her mother's frame as Elsa thought. Ericka opened her mouth with a little pop and took a deep breath to begin, but Elsa cut her off. "I don't know anything, Ericka." Elsa murmured. "He'll be back as soon as it's safe. You might as well stop asking because I don't know any more than that."

Ericka deflated and nodded sadly. "Okay." She whispered, and gently brushed her braid over her shoulder as she backed up. Frost stuck in the carpet around her feet. She pushed the door to the sitting room closed as she left and stared up at the moon outside from the hallway. Big and bold and clear. Somewhere, she had to believe that that moon was shining down on her dad too.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

On Valentine's day, Ben and Mal spend a little time together. Audrey appears to rain on everyone's day.

Chapter Notes

Spoilers in the endnotes.
I do not own Descendants, Beauty and the Beast, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, 101 Dalmatians, or Frozen, OR MOST OF THE QUOTES that I used in this chapter. You all should be very skeptical of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From here on out, everything is uphill. Games are over, my characters are developed, you all know how the stage is set. Now it's time for the real fun to begin.

"We need a day." Mal said over breakfast one morning, taking a leap of faith and leaning towards Ben. They were the only ones in the room. It was one of the few days they actually had the opportunity to eat breakfast together between rushing to start work and waking up at weird times. Mal was snacking on an orange and some blueberries as she thought.

Ben looked up from his phone, where he was checking his email. "What do you mean? We have all of today." He raised an eyebrow.

"Let me rephrase that." Mal sighed. She leaned over and put a hand on his shoulder. "I am exhausted. I need a day of doing absolutely nothing, and you're going to do absolutely nothing with me."

Ben chuckled. "Oh, I see." He clapped his hands together. "Well, unfortunately, I have a full day of work planned, but I'll tell you what. Wait until tomorrow, and we'll take the entire day off."

Mal frowned. "What makes tomorrow so special?" She asked. "You have a full day of work every day."

Ben twiddled his thumbs with a teasing smile. "Well, you see, I'd already planned to take tomorrow off." He smiled.

Mal raised an eyebrow. "Why?" She asked. "You don't ever do that."

"Tomorrow happens to be February fourteenth" Ben smiled. "It's valentine's day, the day of lovers."

"Lovers, huh?" Mal smiled and leaned toward Ben teasingly. The collar of her shirt dipped down
below her collarbone as she smirked. Ben didn't think she noticed as she teased him, but he sure did. "I didn't know you had any of those. There something you're not telling me?"

Ben swallowed and smiled. He reached forward and adjusted the collar of her shirt, making sure to brush her neck lightly. To his surprise, she leaned into his touch. "I guess you'll find out tomorrow."

Mal let out a little breath that crossed his cheek in a cool wind. "I guess I will." She said in a low, breathy tone, almost like a purr. Then she released him and turned on her heel to walk in the general direction of her office. "You Auradonians have too many holidays!" She called over her shoulder as she disappeared. The sound of her even footsteps followed her out the door. Ben was glad no one was around to witness her attitude as a blush burned his cheeks. It made him feel just a little bit special to know she was willing to let some of her… wickedness out around him after all this time.

When his eyes opened the next morning, it was because he was suddenly extremely cold. Ben shivered slightly and turned over, reaching out to his left and trying to feel around for Mal's frame. His hand fell on cold sheets and her empty pillow. Ben frowned. She was gone and had apparently been gone for a while. He knew she wouldn't have gone to work after he'd promised her a day off, and the castle was still too frozen for her to be climbing, so he rolled over and reached for his phone. He sent her a message that read "Where did you go?" before he heard a buzz on the other side of the bed. Ben grumbled in annoyance when he glimpsed the purple case. She'd left her phone. So instead, he found a different contact to ask.

"Hey, Sophia," He asked Mal's best friend. "You wouldn't happen to know where the standing Queen of Auradon is, would you?"


Ben grumbled and swung his legs out of the bed. Everything was freezing. He looked up and realized the window had been cracked open. He stood up and went to shut it. As he did, he caught a glimpse of a white note peeking out under the frame. He seized it and skimmed the purple pen scribbles on the front. 'To the right', it read. He assumed it was a direction for outside. So, Ben pulled on his gloves, a dark blue parka, and a white cap before he tucked his gift underneath his arm and ventured out into the freezing expanse of white.

Ben hadn't noticed before, but it had snowed a lot the last few weeks, mainly when he was holed up in his office working. There was about a foot and a half of snow on the ground, and still-soft wisps floated down from tree branches like sifted flour.

Ben found a set of footprints leading off the cleared sidewalk to the right near Belle's rose garden. They were about half his size. He chuckled as he headed off the path and through the palace gardens, following Mal's footprints.

After about four minutes, they disappeared completely in the center of several trees. Ben looked all around, but couldn't see them or Mal. The snow around where the footprints ended had been thinned considerably as if some strong force of wind had blown it away from where Mal had been standing. Ben wondered if she'd learned to teleport or something. As he turned in a circle, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. A pile of snow had just fallen from the trees. Before he had time to realize what was happening, a large pile of snow fell from the sky and onto his head. Ben yelled in surprise. Ten feet above his head, there was laughter.
"Not cool!" Ben yelled, wiping snow out of his eyes. He glared up above him, where Mal lay on her stomach on a large tree branch, which she had evidently shaken. She was wearing black pants and a purple parka, and her hair hung loosely around her head.

"On the contrary, it's quite cold." Mal teased. Ben pulled his beanie off of his head and shook it out.

"How did you even get up there?" Ben glared as he complained and shoved it back on his head. "There's no footprints!"

Mal's smile grew a little tight. "Oh, um, jumped." To prove her point, she swung and landed on her feet in the snow near him.

Ben studied her. As an Isle girl, she'd known how to lie. But as the months had gone on and on, she'd gotten worse and worse at lying – at least to him. He suspected that she'd used magic, but if she wasn't ready to explain it, he wouldn't press.

He straightened his beanie on top of his head and pulled his package put from under his arm. "Mon chère?" He announced as he presented it with a flourish, bowing slightly to incite her ire. Mal took it with a roll of her eyes, and then shyly pulled a paper folded in fourths out of her parka pocket.

"I didn't know this was a thing until yesterday, but I still didn't want you to think that I-" she stopped with red tones in her cheeks.

Ben got the message. He smiled and gave a playful bow. "I understand, and I care too," He told her.

Mal dipped her chin down to her chest. Ben smiled softly and unfolded the paper as she slit the sides open on her present. Inside was a movie – fictional this time – called Titanic, and a heart-shaped purple necklace taped on, which Mal assumed she'd get the reference to later. Underneath was the movie Maleficent, which Mal still hadn't seen. She smiled, folded her presents against her chest, and watched as his eyes skimmed the paper's contents.

Ben felt his smiling face go slack as he read the first few lines. Almost immediately, a pang set in his chest.

"Dear Ben F," the letter began, "There are so many things I want to tell you and so many things I know you want to know about me. My heart is really full as I write this, so I may be a bit incoherent. I don't exactly have your gift with words.

"You already know there are many differences that stem between us, just from growing up in different places, the least of which is the fact I never saw any of your childhood movies. There were days I couldn't go home because my mother had fits, and there were days I couldn't eat because there was nothing. Did you know that Mal isn't my real name? It's actually Maleficent, like my mom, but I wasn't allowed to have the full thing until I was evil enough. I earned it letter-by-letter. Imagine if I'd earned one more before I came here! Then I'd be Male. Little weird….

"I don't like talking about my kidhood much. It's time to talk about you. Ben, you're honestly one of my favorite people in the entire world. I admire how kind and compassionate you are. You never doubt who you are or what your mission is. Ever since I first came to Auradon, I knew we would have something special together, even just as partners. I stood beside my door and listened to you mutter as I walked away, and I can't deny I felt something. You made me feel welcome, and some of my fondest memories include you. Blowing up the glitter can and your dad's office, everyone in the Auradon chapel echoing our blessing, and our long car drives to nowhere. Thank you for taking
such good care of me. You make me feel foolish and clever and excited and – sometimes – scared all at the same time. So much has happened in the last six months – us getting married, the moors healing, everything – and I couldn't thank you enough for your support and love. I have no idea where the future will take us, but I'm being completely honest when I say that I wouldn't mind if you forever shared with me time, memories, and strength.

"With adoration, Mal."

An honest confession. She'd written him an honest confession. Ben felt like his gift was now substantial and useless, but when he looked up and saw Mal hugging everything to her chest, he couldn't help but smile before he teared up just a little. He held out his arms. Mal awkwardly opened her arms and received him with a hesitant smile. As they hugged each other, Ben bent down to kiss her cheek and bury his face in the shoulder of her parka.

"Thank you, Mal." He murmured in her shoulder. Mal patted his back awkwardly but didn't say anything. When he could tell she was beginning to get a bit weirded out, he backed off, wiping tears from his eyes and sniffing as the tip of his nose turned a bright red.

Mal chuckled at him and pressed a quick peck to his cheek. "Happy Valentine's day." She smiled, standing beside him as he took a few breaths.

After Ben had composed himself, they trailed back to the castle to put their presents in the protection of the house before once again trekking out into the desert of the castle ground in winter. After about thirty minutes of walking side-by-side, Mal dropped behind Ben and started trailing behind as he admired the icicles hanging from the trees. She stopped as he broke off one that was as long as his forearm and bent down to gather a few fistfuls of snow. This she balled up into a weapon of mass destruction and hid it behind her back as he turned with a smile to display his find.

"That's a really long one," Mal commented, tilting her head to the side as she pretended to have been examining the ones hanging from the tree she was beside.

"The ones that form on the palace roof are much larger." Ben shrugged. "We used to keep them up, but then they became a hazard when they started falling in spring, so we knock them down now."

"Huh," Mal said.

Ben turned to toss the icicle into the bushes nearby. As soon as the back of his beanie came into view, Mal reared back her arm and threw. Her aim was true, and the snowball smacked his neck right at the hairline, where his beanie couldn't protect, and a sliver of his neck was exposed.

Ben yelped as something hard and cold hit his neck and immediately began to melt down inside his parka. He quickly brushed as much off as he could and began to shake as the water dripped down his spine. Unfair!" He complained. He turned to look accusingly at Mal just as she raised her arm, a new snowball in her hand and a second in her arm.

Ben dodged the first, but the second smacked him in the forehead. "Arg!" He growled and immediately dropped to his knees to scoop up a small ball. He made three as Mal hastily began to stock up ammo. His first two went wide, but the third caught her ankle and left her shaking the snow out of her shoe. This gave him just enough time to scoop up some snow and toss it. Due to her distraction, Mal didn't notice he'd sent it in a gentle arc until it landed in the collar of her parka and began to melt. Since it wasn't as tightly packed as the others, it melted quicker. Mal panicked as she tried to brush it out of her coat. She began to dance as the cold liquid melted straight down past her shirt.
Ben didn't take the time to laugh. Mal was both better at strategy and a harder-hitter than he was. His upper-hand was momentary before she would jump back to attention. He quickly dropped to his knees and began to gather up the largest amount of snow he could, quickly forming a large ball about three times the size of a basketball. It was slightly misshapen and a little moist, but it would serve its purpose well.

As Mal shook the last of the loose snow out of her jacket and shivered off the last of the uncomfortableness, a shadow loomed over her. She barely had time to look up and yelp before a mountain of snow was dropped unceremoniously on top of her head. It crumbled and fell around her feet in a heap, soaking her hair, face, and coat as it went.

Mal stood and shook in absolute shock. A small pile of snow sat on top of her head, looking like a little hill of powdered sugar. Pieces of sleet were sliding out of her hair and down her face. Snow was stuck to her eyelashes and melting around her ears. The cold stung her skin like wintry bees.

She finally had the sense to wipe off what was on her face and shoulders and flung her hair forward to shake off the powder on top. A great deal remained as she glared.

"This means war." She declared.

Ben laughed. "I can't believe you actually let me do that." He proclaimed. For truly, if she had been on her guard, he never would have gotten that close to her before she attacked back. He slung an arm around her shoulder. Mal grabbed his hand and spun, using his own body weight to gain enough momentum to launch him over her shoulder. Ben landed with a hard thud on her other side in the pile of snow he'd just dropped on Mal's head, gasping for breath.

"Catch me if you can!" She crowed as she braced herself and began to jump into a sprint.

Mal may have been an Isle girl, but she was better at eluding strength and coming up with strategies and planning than she was at fighting or running. That was why she had Jay, who was strong and brutal, and Carlos, who was lithe and fast, as her friends. Ben quickly snaked out and seized her ankle before she could leap away. Mal was yanked back as she started to sprint and was pulled back into the snow with a yell. Ben pulled her back and grabbed the shoulders of her parka to prevent her from pulling away. Mal, seeing that she was trapped, laughed and gripped Ben's parka. She rolled a few times, using momentum and Ben's larger body mass against him to try and wrench his fingers off, but Ben dug in his fingernails and refused to release her.

Mal considered her options. She evidently couldn't break free since she wasn't strong enough, Ben likely wouldn't listen if she started trying to talk her way out of this, and as it were, she was on top of him since he was the heavier weight and she'd been smart not to get trapped under him.

She smirked and chuckled evilly. "Good job." She told him, letting a small purr enter her tone. Ben rolled his eyes when he heard her voice. He clearly wasn't buying her gig. Mal released his parka (Though he kept a firm hold on hers) and brought her mitten-covered hands up to thread under his soaked, snow-covered beanie, and slipped her fingers around his ears carefully, so his lobe was in between her third and fourth fingers. She caught Ben's right knee between her two legs, so she straightened her back and pinned him using that. Then, she leaned in and pressed her mouth to Ben's despite both of their heavy-breathing.

Mal genuinely liked whenever she had the opportunity to kiss Ben, but this time she planned to use it to her advantage. As expected, Ben's arms relaxed a tad and his fingers loosened from her parka, though he kept her pressed to him so that she couldn't jump up suddenly. Smart boy.

Ben's breath tasted minty. She smiled against his mouth and let out a little laugh. Ben began to
relax, but not by much.

Mal remembered when the snow had first fallen in Auradon and how she and Ben had stood out on the balcony and kissed in a way she’d never even heard of before. So now, she slipped a hand out of his beanie and onto his neck and began to carefully move her mouth against Ben’s, letting her mouth open so he could use his tongue easier. She was on top, but she yielded a small amount of power to him so that he would feel like he was in control of the situation. He moved his hands – one to her hip and the other to the back of her head, and they began to kiss each other. She relaxed her legs where she had pinned him, and as she did, he relaxed his grip and force, figuring she’d actually given up on getting away.

For a few minutes, they laid in the snow. Mal carefully timed everything. Finally, Ben was rendered unsuspecting. Both his hands migrated to her hips, and he’d failed to notice her moving her knees outside his legs to pack snow up alongside them. She kissed him once, twice, and then three times before she willed her body into the same tightness as a springboard and used her knees to launch away from him. Not sparing a second, she took off. Ben was, as planned, caught off guard as he struggled out of the snow Mal had worked up around his knee and sides, and by the time he’d gotten up, she was out of sight.

Mal was smart. She ran back the way they’d come and mixed her footprints among Ben’s and hers before she sprinted a new way to Belle’s garden, which was made of tall hedges that would bloom in warmer weather. What she hadn’t planned for was the king and queen themselves to be taking a late-afternoon stroll.

As she came around a corner, she caught a glimpse of Belle’s famous red cloak before she yelped and skidded on the icy pathway, straight into both of her in-laws.

Her yelp echoed in the expanse of white, as did both Belle and Adam’s yells of surprise. Mal winced as her ears rang.

"What on earth?" Adam bellowed before he saw Mal. "Mal?’ he asked, completely thrown off. "What on-" he began to repeat before he stopped himself. "Why are you running?" He zeroed in of the condition of her apparel. "What happened to you?"

"Are you being attacked?” Belle asked with wide eyes, brushing snow off of Mal's shoulders and craning her head to look around Mal's frame.

"No, no!" Mal protested, backing off of the former king and queen as she calmed down. "I'm-I'm..." She wilted before their eyes, entirely aware of how childish she seemed. "Running from Ben." She muttered.

"Why?” Belle asked, staring incredulously at her.

Mal sputtered as she hurried to explain the situation. "Well, he dropped a snowball over my head and then I judo-flipped him over my shoulder and..."

"Hey!" A new voice protested as Ben whirled around the same corner Mal had just torn about. His hat was crooked and he still had snow sticking to his sides. "You totally struck first!" He claimed, crossing his arms.

"How long have you been standing there?” Mal deadpanned.

Ben wilted. "Uh, only a little while..." He trailed off with his cheeks turning a little red.

"You were going to make me explain all of this to your parents while you hung out and giggled?"
Mal exclaimed, throwing her hands above her head. 

"Of course," Ben smirked and crossed his arms. "You were the person who ran into them."

Mal growled in frustration. "I take it back!" She exclaimed, balling her fists up and glancing for a second over her shoulder at Belle and Adam, who weren't quite sure how to take the situation. "I am being attacked. And victimized." She shot Ben a dirty look. It only served to make laugh even harder.

Ben suddenly solemnized and put his head down a few notches. Mal remembered the former Queen and King were behind her and turned to face them.

Belle examined them both and looked at her husband. They seemed to be communicating through their eyes. Then, Belle muttered: "He's your son."

Ben's mouth dropped in indignation as Mal guffawed.

Adam shook his finger. "And he's about as discrete as you are." He said sternly. He examined both young adults. Mal's hair was mussed and clumped messily from where Ben had been holding onto the back of her head a few minutes ago. Ben's beanie was completely soaked, and both of their faces were bright red. Adam remained silent for a few seconds. "Your lips are chapped." He told them.

Both Ben and Mal's left hands flew to their mouths. Their faces turned even redder as Belle began to bite her lip in amusement.

"You ought to go clean up before you get a cold," Belle advised. "It's almost lunch, and I expect you to be presentable, both of you."

Technically, Mal considered, Belle was not her mother. She didn't have to listen. However, as soon as the command left the former queen's lips, her feet took two steps backward, in the direction of the path. "Yes, Belle. Sorry for running into you."

Both adults waved her off. Ben smiled uneasily and back away with her. "See you later, mom and dad." He said quickly. As he turned around, he caught Mal's eyes. A competitive glint was in her eyes. She turned and began to sprint back to the palace. "No, you don't!" He yelled as he sprinted after her, easily bypassing her on the path and closing the front door after he rushed in, so she'd have to reopen it herself.

Belle and Adam brushed themselves off. "She's like you," Adam told Belle as they linked arms and continued their stroll.

"In what way?" Belle asked curiously. She didn't really see that many similarities but was interested in hearing his perspective.

"You used to throw snow at me too." Adam chuckled. "And you both forged your own ways as queen despite many who wondered if you'd be able to make it."

Belle hummed in thought. She remembered quite clearly the whispers that had prosecuted her the first few months of her queenship, wondering if a small-village girl with big ideas would be able to be a suitable queen. Luckily, though, she'd managed to pull a kingdom together. Now, it was her son's turn

Adam hummed their song as he squeezed her arm to his side. Belle clutched her husband's arm a little tighter and leaned her head on his shoulder. Twenty-four, almost twenty-five years together,
and she still felt like a new bride in quiet moments like this.

Cinnamon rolls and a peculiar red fruit for lunch. Belle and Adam exchanged looks as they walked in. Ben pulled out Mal's chair for her and glared at her teasingly as they sat beside each other. The purplette, knowing Ben was much faster than her, had not used the route Ben had, but instead found the outside window underneath their room and used a little magic to help her scale the walls and unlock the window from the outside. By the time Ben had arrived, huffing and puffing, Mal had already finished pulling a new woolen sweater over her head. It turned out the young King of Auradon was a sore loser.

Mal ignored him with a small smile pulling at her lips and reached for a cinnamon roll. She examined the fruit with a judging eye. It was new, almost heart-shaped, and had many yellowish seeds in its skin.

"Can you pass the strawberries?" Ben asked.

Berries. Fruit. These weren't like the other berries she knew of, though. They seemed about the girth of cherries instead. Mal passed the bowl to Ben and watched as he took five or six. She hesitantly took two before passing the bowl to Adam, who sat beside Belle.

She attacked the cinnamon roll first, watching to see how the others ate the strawberries. Belle and Ben ate around the leafy stems, but Adam pulled off the leaves. Finally, she picked one up skeptically.

"Have you never had one of these?" Ben asked, examining her critical gaze

"Nope." Mal shook her head. She turned the strawberry back and forth in her hand like she couldn't tell if it was a gem or a piece of glass.

"You'll like them." He promised.

"I'm sure," Mal said flatly. She took a bite and put on a quick smile as she turned to Ben. "Mmm!" She exclaimed sarcastically before she tasted what she'd actually put in her mouth.

Her brain disconnected, and her eyes opened wide. "Mmm!" she exclaimed, slapping a hand over her mouth.

Ben folding his arms. "I told you so." He said in a nagging, sarcastic tone.

Mal swallowed and reached across the table for the bowl of strawberries. "How is it that I am only just having these after been here for seven months?" She demanded. Ben shrugged as Mal piled twelve or thirteen more red berries on her plate. Belle looked up from where she was reading Romeo and Juliet and met her husband's eyes. They stared silently at each other for several seconds before Adam took Belle's hand off the book and squeezed it lightly.

Lumiere peered around the open doorway with a semi-panicked look. "Ben, I'm afraid I have to interrupt your lunch." He said quickly. Mal turned at examined the elderly servant, who looked at her like he was expecting her to be upset.

Ben frowned as he gently pried the strawberry bowl out of Mal's hands. He didn't want her to eat herself sick with her new favorite food. "Yes, Lumiere? Is something wrong?" He asked, setting the ceramic bowl away from her while their attention was focused on Lumiere.

Lumiere wrung his hands and glanced nervously at Mal. Adam and Ben stood up. A deep sense of
dread filled Mal's chest.

"Princess Audrey has just arrived. She's in the foyer, ahem, with a few... tokens of her appreciation?" Lumiere explained. He looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Audrey?" Ben asked. "What's she doing here on Valentines – oh." He turned a bit red. Mal's mind blanked out. Audrey... Valentine's... the day of lovers. Immediately, her mind jumped to the same conclusion that Belle, Adam, and Ben had already reached, and her mouth dropped open with a little exhale. She glanced up at Ben, who was turning a sickly shade of green as he stared at Lumiere, begging him with his eyes to tell Ben it wasn't like they all knew it was.

"Well," Belle said tactfully, looking down at her plate and giving off an entire aura of annoyance. "I'd say she's got some nerve." Adam nodded fiercely along with her words.

Ben put a hand on Mal's shoulder. "I'll take care of it. Don't worry." He reassured her and moved out of his chair. "It'll only take a moment."

He pushed his chair back under the table and left the room at a brisk pace. Mal waited until he was out of earshot before she stood as well. She filled her pockets with the strawberries on her plate, and then took a napkin and wrapped the rest up in a bundle. She looked up at Belle and Adam.

"I hope you didn't expect me to stay here." She remarked, studying their frames for any hint that they were going to make her stay until Ben came back. They didn't usually, but there was a first for everything.

Belle shook her head. "Oh, no. I was surprised you even waited for him to leave." She turned a page to her book with a smirk.

Adam hummed in agreement. "Go on, then. Better hurry." He retook his seat and set his hand atop Belle's.

Mal smiled and slipped towards the door Ben had vanished out of.

Why was she leaving? It wasn't like Ben was perfectly okay to handle Audrey's flamboyancy on his own. Also, she totally trusted him to not cheat on her or anything, especially since Audrey grated on him such. Could it really be considered cheating? Yes, of course. Probably?

Mal rounded the corner to the entrance hall and stood beside the edge of the wall so she could hear what was going on down below. She hadn't been that far behind Ben, so the two of them were still exchanging pleasantries.

"It's so great to see you again, Benny-Boo!" Audrey crowed. "I missed you!"

"It's nice to see you too, Audrey. I didn't realize you would be dropping by today." Ben said. His tone made Mal wrinkle her nose. He was talking all official, all stern and kingly. Mal listened to his shoes click across the floor. Even his footfalls were perfectly timed.

"Sorry for not calling ahead. I used to drop by all the time, so I hoped it wouldn't be an inconvenience." Audrey said, sounding sweeter than sugar. Mal rolled her eyes and began untwisting her napkin to pull a strawberry out as she listened to them talk.

"Well, we were just in the middle of lunch, so you weren't interrupting anything too dramatic. Just keep in mind that I am king now, and I can't afford to drop everything every time a friend comes to the palace. It's nice to catch up, but please let me know ahead of time if you decide to swing around again." Ben counseled. A warning was clear in his tone, and Mal could almost hear Audrey's jaw
hitting the floor.

"But – you always welcomed me when I came before! Aside from those last two times..." Audrey growled. Mal could feel Ben roll his eyes from twenty feet away.

"Yes, but I was just the prince back then. Now I'm the King, and I need to make sure the country is operable. Also, we were together back then. We're not now." Ben argued.

"We could be," Audrey proposed.

A chill settled on her skin. Mal peered around the corner to make sure she hadn't really heard what she thought she'd heard. Down the stairs, three feet in front of the front door, Audrey stood with a card and a lapel in her hand. A box of chocolates was tucked under her arm. She was wearing a dress that was more red than pink, with silver embroidered tights that made her tan legs look metallic. Her dress was very womanly. It was elbow-length and made of a very stretchy, easily-removable fabric. A very low v-neck cut down to her ribcage. The skirt to the dress was knee length but had a risqué slit up to her upper thigh. Her hair was curled and half-up with a large diamond choker set in between her collar bones.

Mal observed how Ben kept his eyes firmly trained on Audrey's face and how he kept his shoulders rigid. No relaxing there. She couldn't deny though, that she was apprehensive. Her mouth was dry, and she almost felt a little sick.

"No, we can't be, Audrey." Ben retorted, sounding equally taken aback and clasping his hands behind his back like a king. "I'm married. Remember?" Mal squinted and could see him fiddling with his ring out of Audrey's sight. She lifted her own hand and began to twist her ring, mirroring his actions as she swallowed a little. Why was her throat so dry?

"To an Isle witch who's not here most of the time anyway." Audrey laughed, stalking toward Ben. "How could I forget? Is she even here right now, or have you been spending today all alone?"

Before he could answer, Audrey giggled and said: "Besides, she can't be a very passionate woman, what with her growing up in villainy."

Ben exhaled, which Mal could hear echo all the way up the stairs. "Why would you say that?" He demanded. "Who gave you the right?"

"Is she, then?" She laughed, taking another step towards him and leaning forward so that stupid, stupid dress dropped a little. Ben stopped her with a finger and an angry look. "I thought not."

Audrey laughed. Her comment stung like someone was pricking her with needles. Mal was plenty passionate... about the moorlands the Isle and kissing Ben and a couple of other things. Getting physical with her husband didn't happen to be one of them, but that was fine because this was all arranged, anyway. It was temporary.

"Don't tempt me, Audrey. It won't work. Mal, for your information, is the most fantastic woman, sorry – lady, I have ever met. You're wrong about her. She's plenty passionate, smart, kind, and she's a fantastic queen." He warned through gritted teeth.

"Well," Audrey flipped her hair. "She's not my queen, and I bet if you let me, I could sway you to my point of view." Audrey leaned up and put her arms around Ben. He seized her wrists and let them swing back down to her sides before he turned.

"I think we're done here," Ben said, staring at the floor as he began to walk up the stairs. "You disrespect my wife and the way I choose to live my life. I will be informing your mother and grandmother about your conduct."
"What?" Audrey protested, looking like she'd swallowed a lemon. "But Ben, won't you even consider – you loved me, I know it!"

"No," Ben said softly, pausing. He turned and sat down on the stairs. "I never loved you, and I told you so. You know I've never fallen in love before," He ran his hands through his hair. "You were my best friend, and I hoped it would turn into love, but it never could. And now… how could I love a child who thinks to dress up in her mother's color, to come down into a married man's home, and request that he lust her and lay with her on the day we celebrate the very thing that makes us different from our villains – love." He shook his head.

Audrey went to sit on the stair below him, where she set her arms and her chin on his knee. Ben moved away with a sigh, but Audrey began to talk. "Ben, you know me. We're best friends. It's not lusting if we love each other and it's not wrong because I know you and you'd never do anything wrong. And Ben, if this is about Mal, don't worry. She grew up with her mother. How could she understand love? She's probably used to affairs and carnal desires. How do you know she hasn't gone off with someone already? Who knows what's in the moors? How do you know, every time she says: "I love you," that she actually knows what that means? Or worse, that she's not thinking of someone else when she says it."

Ben was silent. Mal watched as his shoulders began to tremble. A sense of horror welled up in her. Was he about to break? Were Audrey's evil words affecting him? God, he had to know it wasn't true, didn't he? Ben stood up. "Please leave." He growled in a tone so low and rocky that Mal almost couldn't understand him. "Now." He demanded. He swung his legs away and stood up. Audrey sat, looking shocked on the stairs.

Ben turned and continued his walk up the stairs. He glanced down the hall, then did a double take. Mal moved out of sight, knowing it was too late and he'd already seen her there. Her heart thumped against her ribcage.

"You've trapped yourself, Ben!" Audrey exclaimed, her voice levels rising. "Why did you even bring her over? Why did your parents bring her? They honestly couldn't think you'd ever fall for – a villain!"

"I fell for an angel." Ben corrected, still walking away. "But I'm speaking to a villain."

"She's warped your judgment! You're in danger!" Audrey claimed. Her face was turning red as she clenched her fists.

"Enough, Audrey," Ben growled, waving a hand in her general direction.

"No, it's not enough. She'll never be enough for you, Benjamin Florian. Even now, she probably has you under a million spells! She's magical and villainous – she can't be trusted!" Audrey began to yell. "Has she ever even told you she loves you? You deserve more!"

Ben stopped dead and took more than a deep breath. "Audrey, leave now, please. You will not be accepted back if you continue this. I'll call the guards if I have to."

"Ben, you're making a huge mistake," Audrey growled through gritted teeth.

Ben's nostrils flared. He turned, looked at Audrey, and for the first time, looked her up and down, examining her and her preppy outfit and taking everything about her in. Just the insinuation made Mal's skin crawl. Then, a tight smile stretched across his lips. "Am I? He asked. "I don't see anything here that I'm missing out on with Mal."
He turned as Audrey's jaw unhinged from her skull and hung open. Mal kept her mouth shut and did not move into the light as Ben turned into the corridor, brushing past her. She knew that if Audrey knew she was there, she would accuse her of bewitching Ben, and claim that Ben only turned down her risqué offer because she was standing nearby. So, as soon as she was sure Audrey had walked out the front door and away from the building, she turned and quietly stalked behind her husband.

He wove through the corridors with such speed that Mal could scarcely keep up until he finally paused at the doorway to their bedroom. There, he knocked softly, and called: "Mal?"

Everything clicked. When he'd seen her vanish, he assumed she'd run to their room. He hadn't even noticed her standing in the shadows or following him up.

"Yes?" She asked.

He turned around and smiled at her. "Oh." He rubbed the back of his head. "I hope you didn't follow me all the way up here and I walked here for no reason."

"I did, but it doesn't matter," Mal replied, pulling a strawberry out of her pocket. She slipped past him and opened the door. "After you?"

Ben's shoulders fell a little. "Thanks." He mumbled, slipping inside. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I honestly thought you knew I was there." Mal shrugged. She shut the door behind them and went to sit on their little chaise. "Come sit by me?" She asked, patting the seat.

He did so with none too wary eye. As he glanced over at her, Mal untwisted her napkin. "Strawberry?" She offered, tucking her feet up underneath her.

Ben took one wordlessly.

Mal drummed her fingers on the arm of the chaise. "That was dramatic." She started.

"Yeah…" Ben agreed. "How much did you hear?"

"Almost all of it." Mal took a bite of strawberry. Ben twisted one in his hands quietly. Mal watched him, then slipped a hand under his chin. "Hey." She said. With that one word, the reality of it all started to crush her. Audrey had tried to steal him back. She had used cruel flattery, and wicked premonitions, and it hurt. A lot, actually. She choked. "You – you know that I – I would never, ever-" Tears filled her eyes. Mal was so horrified at herself for the tears that she bit her lip and tasted blood. "I'd never spell you." She said in a strangled tone. "Never, ever, never. Not without your permission and nothing dangerous because I-"

"Shh," He cut her off with a hand on her cheek, which was good because Mal felt like she was beginning to blubber. "I know. You haven't used magic on anyone except the moors and yourself. And you've only ever used it for good when you could have done otherwise." He smiled, and then withdrew his hand. "Audrey was just being cruel. She has an incredible capability for evil, and she just doesn't realize it." He clasped his hands around his knees and took to staring straight ahead at the wall in front of him.

Mal scrubbed the water out of her eyes before the tears could fall and slipped onto the floor. She knelt at Ben's feet and reached up. He, too, was crying, so she wiped his tears away, and then kissed the tip of his nose. He began to shake. "I'm sorry." He hid his face. "I shouldn't be like this, I'm sorry."
"No, no. That was so hard on you." Mal said. She could tell he was trying to hold up for her sake. "It's okay. You don't have to be king right now. Just be Ben."

Those seemed to be the magic words. He'd been trying to be king again. Always careful of his words, always trying to be upstanding around people he wanted to impress. Ben broke down, sliding onto the floor and burying his head in her shoulder. Mal clutched him as tightly as she could as he shook and sobbed. Her throat felt tight as his hands landed awkwardly on her leg.

"She was my friend." He sobbed. "We grew up together. And the things she said, how awful."

It was awful. Mal couldn't imagine if someone like Jay or Carlos had twisted their past like that. Or worse, if Ben had twisted it. She rubbed his back and whispered sweet nothings into his hair as he kept his long arms wrapped around her waist. After a long while, he began to calm down. Mal mess with her hair fondly as he slowly gathered himself and revealed his red-eyed, red-nosed face. She laid his head on her lap as the rest of his body stretched down past the chaise. She rubbed his hair and wiped stray tears away from his eyes as they appeared.

"I'm proud of you." She whispered.

He chuckled dryly. "Me? Can't imagine why. Aren't you worried or freaking out about any of the things she said?"

About how she wasn't a passionate woman? About how she'd never be enough for him? Mal thought about it, then shook her head. "No. I know she said everything spitefully. A couple of things hurt, but I've definitely heard worse. I'm proud of you for standing so tall. You handled that so well."

"By breaking down and crying like a girl." Ben scowled, wiping at his face.

Mal frowned. "What do you mean, like a girl?" She asked. "I'm a girl, and I've never cried in my life. Granted, I just came close, but I never have."

Ben looked a little surprised. He put his hand to his head and thought for a few seconds. "Huh." He said. "I guess that was a really sexist thing to say. I'm sorry, I won't say it anymore."

"Sexist?" Mal asked.

"Being particularly mean to one of the genders," Ben replied lazily.

"Okay." Mal shrugged.

Ben lifted his head and slid up close to Mal. "Can I get a few things off my chest?" He asked.

A sense of dread washed over her. Still, she squared her shoulders and put an arm around his neck. "Of course. That's what I'm here for, right?"

Ben clasped his hands and began to twiddle his fingers. "Audrey said—during her rant, you've probably gone off with someone else at the moors. I know she was being spiteful and trying to hurt me and you, and I trust you. I just— I want you to be honest with me." He slumped in defeat. "I-I want you to be happy. Above all else. And, if there's someone else…" His breath caught, and Ben had to turn to cough momentarily. Mal saw the tears return to his eyes.

She reached out to touch his shoulder. "There's no one else." She promised. "And I'm going to stay with you. I wouldn't make you stand by and keep pretending to be my husband as I frolic with other people."
Ben nodded and took several deep breaths. He laid his head on her shoulder. His fingers splayed out on his legs. "I love you." He told her softly for the first time.

The air in the room became moist and hard to breathe. Mal felt like someone had laid a pile of rocks on her chest. She froze. He loved her? For real? This soon? How could he possibly know that? After several seconds, Ben moved. Mal knew immediately that her stillness had hurt him.

"It's okay though," Ben said sadly and cleared his throat. "You don't have to love me. You know I'll understand."

Audrey's words echoed in her brain like someone had shot a bullet inside her head and it was ricocheting, again and again. "You deserve better." "Has she ever even told you that she loves you?" The ceiling suddenly seemed dramatically low, and the walls were inching closer to her, waiting to crush her beneath an incomprehensible weight.

Mal let out a guttural sound. Ben was looking at her strangely. "Mal." He called her back to earth. Then, more urgently: "Mal, breathe."

She looked down at her hands. They felt numb. Her head was pounding and colors were blending. She couldn't remember her own name as she focused on her heartbeat, loud in her ears. She put her hands around her own throat and took a deep breath. Her head started to clear.

Ben took her face carefully and looked into her eyes, drawing her focus. "Are you okay?" He asked. His hands were soft on her jaw, but the last thing she wanted him to do was kiss her now.

Mal didn't know if she was okay or not. She remembered when she'd come to Auradon, and she'd been sitting in her old room, and the world had started to fall in on her, and the lights had been too bright, and her head had wanted to split. She felt like that now.

"Ben." She gasped. "I- I don't know. I like you, a lot, but-" More blasted tears welled up in her eyes. "Audrey's right. How could I ever know what love is? I don't know, and I don't want to accidentally lie to you because… what if I don't ever know?" She sniffled, stared at the ceiling, and tried to blink the liquid away. How could Maleficent's daughter ever fall in love? And with a prince? The idea was just... preposterous. "I- I would never want to lie to you or hurt you." She confessed. The silence intensified as she gasped for breath and fought to keep from crying. It was a hard battle. She'd never had to stave off tears with her sheer will before.

Ben listened carefully to her words and smiled. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. His lips lingered on her face. Mal squeezed her eyes shut until she felt him lean back a little. She peeked her eyes open and met his gaze. Then, he got to his knees and whispered: "I love you too, Mal."

He stood up and went into the bathroom to wash his face, sensing Mal wanted to be alone. She sat in shock for several seconds and then stared at her hands, still warm from Ben holding them.

'I love you too', he'd said. Too. As if returning a sentiment. Mal had said: 'I would never lie or hurt you', and he'd said: "I love you too."

Is that what love was? Protecting the other from harm? Being open and honest even if you broke down in front of the other person? Could it be that she already knew what it was like?

She thought of Belle, quietly trusting Adam, and Adam looking to Belle to correct him. She thought of Ben, encouraging her to do magic, which she loved. She remembered all the times she needed to talk to Ben to get his advice.

And Sophia, sending soft smiles at Stewart, and Stewart supporting Mal. The moor people,
supporting each other. Aurora, encouraging and reprimanding Audrey. Belle and Adam standing in
support of her and Ben on their wedding day, even signing their gifts to Mal as 'Mom and Dad'.

The only thing Mal was sure of at this point was that love could not be was dissing your childhood
friend into lust using his current marriage. Funny all the things she could learn not to be from
Audrey.

Despite all her thoughts, she couldn't look at him for a while. She couldn't even look at the spot
he'd been sitting at. Her heart was beating too fast for her to focus, and her hands were shaking too
much to be useful. Mal stayed crouched beside the couch, thinking on everything, picking off the
strawberries in her pockets one by one.

She liked Ben. A lot. And he liked her. And they were married. And he was one of her closest
friends. But she couldn't lie and say she loved him.

And so, like a fool, she took to her new page to console herself. At the top of the Big News section
was the latest trending article: Signs that Queen Mal is about to go 'Empress of all Evil' on us. She
swallowed and quickly thumbed away to her own tab. "On this day of snow and love and whatever
else 'the day of lovers' is supposed to encompass, I have a very serious question for Auradon: What
is love supposed to look/feel like?"

Ben reappeared from the bathroom, saw her still sitting alone beside the couch, and wandered over
to take her hand. She let him, though she stared warily as he looked into her eyes, and then raised
her knuckles to his mouth to kiss them. Her stomach turned. Without a word, he stood up and
straightened his outfit. "I want to go finish lunch." He whispered. "Do you want to come with?"

Mal shook her head without a word and dropped her gaze to the carpet. Ben waited a few seconds
and then walked away. She listened to his feet scuff the carpet as he approached the hall and then
heard the door click into place behind him. Her phone buzzed, and she looked down at the screen.
A text from Sophia read: "So... what happened?"

"What do you mean?" Mal asked with a frown.

"You're posting on social media." Sophia prodded. "Something bad happen?"

Mal swallowed. She couldn't believe Sophia already knew. More people must look at her page than
she'd thought. "Audrey." She admitted to Sophia. "She came back up to talk at Ben. I guess I'm just
a little stunned." She returned to the page she'd uploaded, and her breath caught. It hadn't been ten
minutes, and people were responding and sharing her simple post. And the comments were
unbelievable. Some were silly, like: 'First comment', and others were in-depth chains of thought. A
message from the daughter of the Snow Queen, Ericka, stood out to her: "Finding ways to be there
for each other, even when the distance is tough."

That comment was a bit strange. All of Ericka's family lived in Arendelle. But it struck an odd
chord in Mal, and several pangs of guilt ran through her. Once again, she was failing her Isle
Friends.

"I remember during my lifetime I would meet women, and it was almost like God would say to me,
'Now this is not the one you are going to end up with, but she is a lot like this woman; look at this
woman, study this woman.' And when my wife showed up, He was like, 'You recognize her now?"

"Vows and rings don't change anything: the challenges are the same. Every day is just a conscious
commitment to making the next day better."
"Ultimately, I believe the only secret to a happy marriage is choosing the right person. Life is a series of choices, right?"

"When there's someone who doesn't catch your eye immediately, but you talk to them and they become the most beautiful thing in the world."

"Finding the one is not just a feeling, it's an educated guess. I feel like I chose someone to share my life with who is my friend."

There were others. Countless others with funny stories and cute slogans and complex philosophies. There were so many she had no idea if she'd ever be able to skim them all. It was kind of cool, really. Maybe the people of Auradon weren't sure about her as a leader, but they were sure of her as a person.

Mal clutched her phone in her hands as a little smile spread across her face. This was who she was working for. This was who Ben worked for. This was their sprawling nation of families and friends who looked up to the palace every day. And Mal held a deep, deep respect for them - the people who put their faith in the government and demanded the best of their leaders.

"You're posting weird stuff." Ben texted. Mal wrinkled her nose.

"'One thing I do find really sexy is a girl who's good at crossword puzzles.'" She quoted back at him from her page. He sent a moving picture of someone rolling their eyes and then fell silent, and Mal leaned back against the headboard. Step one, which had been to get out of being queen and get back to the Isle, had failed. Step two, fix the Isle, was underway. She was healing the moors, and finally working together with Ben. Now, she assumed, step five would be to figure out this mess of complicated emotions. What was love, anyway?

Despite the setbacks of the day, they still made it a beautiful day in the end. She found him in the quiet hours of the evening with his family. Everyone crowded into the family room; Ben, Belle, Adam, Sophia, Stewart, Lumiere and a tall, pale, woman with a sickly pallor who was introduced as Lumiere's sweetheart Plumette. When she first entered, they all glanced up simultaneously, giving Mal the impression that they'd all been talking about her even though the room was silent. She assumed it was all good things from the lack of animosity as she went to Ben and sat beside him.

Together on the floor, Mal didn't touch Ben until he opened his hand, palm up, for her to slip her fingers into. When their hands were twined closely together, She turned her head and kissed him quickly. With the light of the fire casting orange shadows on them, she leaned her head on his shoulder and yawned. Behind them, Adam was pulling up a blanket around him and Belle, Lumiere was rubbing Plumette's chilly fingers, and Sophia and Stewart were whispering quietly with their knees touching. Mal reached into her pocket and pulled out the last one of the strawberries she had snitched that day. She showed Ben her treasure with a cheeky smile and used her nail to clumsily break the berry in half for him.

With the taste of warm strawberry on her tongue and the comforting smell of smoke in the room, her eyes began to drift closed. As Ben's warm, strong fingers curled over her knuckles and twisted her marriage band around her finger, she dreamed of bright colors and soft smiles.

You know, I'm not going to say people who review may get spoilers or small tips about upcoming chapters, but hey, people who ask questions may receive answers…
"You say you've done magic before at the castle?" Elias asked. Mal studied his expression. He did not seem angry, or fearful. Only determined. Mal smirked.

"Yes, actually. I blew up a can of glitter when Ben tried to wrestle it away from me, and I tried to be lazy and clean his dad's office with magic and ended up throwing twenty-years' worth of dust into the air and blowing all the lightbulbs out in the room." She announced. A nearby reporter gave her a cautious look.

"I find it very interesting how you describe yourself using magic." Elias probed. "Compared to your mother, you seem to use it as a practical joke or a shortcut. Not a bad thing at all."

"Exactly right." Mal nodded. "I don't actually share a lot of similarities with my mom. Except for my eyes. And maybe my skin color." Mal examined her skin playfully.

"No horns or anything?" Elias teased.

"I actually do have horns." Mal smiled, putting her hands down. Elias's composure broke. "No way." He said skeptically. "I think you're playing me."

"I do too!" Mal insisted.

"No." Elias shook his head. "I am looking at your head, and I can see quite clearly you do not have horns."

"It was a surprise for me too," Mal patted his arm as she pretended to be sympathetic. Elias stared at her, looking for evidence to call her bluff. "You seriously have horns?" He asked.

Mal bent forward and pulled her hair flat before she felt the top of her head shift a little. Someone yelled in the room, and it went deathly silent as Mal sat up.

Everyone had gone silent and was staring at her, but Elias was glaring. "For real?" He complained. "You seriously have horns?"

"I told you I did!" Mal rolled her eyes. She shook her head and they disappeared back into her skull. "I have wings too." She added.

Elias turned away in falsified disgust. "I am not calling that bluff." He spotted Ben across the room, who was tense and staring at Mal in a quiet panic. "King Ben!" He called, standing up. "Does she have wings?"
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

We start with Mal having once again left for the moors. Ben is sleepless once more. He and Mal have a conversation on their curse effects, and then we split scene to visit Arendelle, where Elsa is considering making some drastic policy changes. Ben is doing the same thing back in Auradon City, but on an international level. We see the Vk's on the Isle, where they're a bit skeptical of all the changes going down, and at the end, Mal returns.

MAJOR HINT - Check closely all the lines about Maleficent.

Chapter Notes

WanderlustandFreedom, why are you uploading two chapters in one week? Because it's mah birthday, that's why. Don't expect this to become a regular thing though. I like having time to work on chapters to make sure they're as mistake-free as I can make them. But hey, why don't you take advantage of the extra chapter as my gift to you and leave a review on what you think.

Congratulations also to all those whose semesters are ending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sunlight filtered into his office and the frost from the former night continued melting off of the panes. A pounding headache threatened to cause him permanent brain damage, but he couldn't shut up the window while he had a visitor. "This is ridiculous," Ben complained as he popped open his third soda pop that day. "She's been gone for three days, and I'm back to zero sleep." He leaned against his hand and examined the two women in the room. Fairy Godmother was sitting in front of him while his mother waited anxiously at the door to see what she was going to say.

"It must be a curse thing." The Fairy Godmother nodded sympathetically. "Have you tried coffee instead of soda?" She gestured to his drink of choice.

"Tried. I can't stand the smell of coffee for some reason." Ben groaned running a hand over his face. "I'd rather be exhausted than exhausted and sick."

Belle scrunched up her nose as she listened to the two talk. It was March third, and Mal had returned safely to the moors, much to Ben's chagrin. "We've got to have some solution. He can't just keep working until he passes out and repeat until she returns, can he?" She asked, wincing as she remembered Ben's exasperation when they'd gotten up the day after Mal had left.

The Fairy Godmother took a deep breath. "I mean, technically he can. It's just a horrible idea mental-health-wise." She paused, pursing her lips. "And you're certain Mal does not experience this while she is away?"

Ben shrugged. "She seemed absolutely chipper when she returned last February. Didn't mention
being tired at all. If anything, she seemed to have a little more energy than usual." Which had been a bit irritating, but whatever. At least she'd been back. And this time, she wouldn't be away as long.

"Could that be related?" Belle asked. "Could the curse be designed to sap Ben's strength and give it to Mal?"

"Doubtful." The Fairy Godmother considered, twiddling her thumbs together. "If anything, Maleficent would want Mal to be sick while she's away from the palace, so she can stay and continue doing Maleficent's dirty work for her. Of course, she may have considered the consequences of Auradon government marrying Ben to Mal and keeping them in separate locations...." She trailed off, biting her lip. "I'll look into it, of course, but there's still no visible coding in the spell for such a strange occurrence. And it's more likely that Mal was more relaxed after being surrounded with such high rates of magic for so long. If I had the opportunity to visit the moors...." The Fairy Godmother stopped out of respect to the laws abiding magic, but Ben saw her intent on her face. The moors were a safe haven for magical creatures, and he'd seen firsthand the amount of growth, physical, emotional, and magical, that Mal had undergone after two separate months at the moors. He imagined what it would do for all of Auradon's magical citizens if they were allowed to visit the Moors. Most specifically, he imagined the sons and daughters of Flora, Fauna, and Merriweather, and the Fairy Godmother's own daughter Jane, who was only a little older than Mal.

Ben drummed his fingers and made a mental note to send out a separate email to all the fairies, asking what the consequences had been for magical creatures to have not used magic for so long. He expected dramatics from the three good fairies, but he trusted the Fairy Godmother to give him a direct, straightforward answer. He could always ask her here, but his mom might carry messages to his dad, who might try to... advise him on the subject.

Who were others he could ask? The genie, whose two kids were Jordan, one of Ben's old friends, and Jacob, age eight. Queen Clarion at Pixie hollow might be good, but they had continued with the use of their magic throughout the last thirty years due to the fact that Auradon couldn't exactly reach them to enforce the laws. That, and their magic literally made the seasons change. The blue fairy and his own family enchantress would be good to ask, assuming he could reach them. King Triton had control of the seas without his trident, but he could still ask. He could ask Elsa her opinions, though she was so far north and so heavily guarded that she could basically ignore most of Auradon's laws if she wanted, as she had with the laws against magic.

So, Fairy Godmother, Three Good Fairies, Blue Fairy, Enchantress, Genie, Triton, Elsa, and possibly Glinda the good witch, the Russo family, Mary Poppins, and others if he could contact them. Ben wished he could journey to DunBroch to see if he could track down the witch who had given Merida her infamous spell, but he had a feeling that would go much less well than he would hope. On one hand, Merida had been pretty vague about the kind of spell she wanted but given that two people had been turned into bears, he should probably avoid the area.

"Hello?" someone snapped their fingers in his face. "Anyone home?"

"Sorry." Ben shook his head as the Fairy Godmother arched an eyebrow at him.

"You'll need to speak with Mal." Belle filled him in firmly. "The first time, it was a coincidence. Now, it's uncanny. Maybe she will be able to stop the effects with her own magic next time, or something." She sighed and pressed her fingertips to her browline

Ben sighed. He knew it was inevitable, but some part of him was dismayed. Mal still had to go to the moors, to her people, but now she'd feel guilty about it. He nodded to the Fairy Godmother and stood to shake her hand as she left. Then, he opened a document and began work before he could
Ben was barely awake as he filled the stone Mal had given him with water and set it on the counter, peering down into the surface of the water. He felt all around the edge for some sort of engraving. Maybe a rune, or a magic lock. There was none. The basin sat on the bathroom counter for several minutes before Ben prodded it. A little water splashed out that he quickly mopped up with a hand towel. Nothing happened.

Mal had said it would help them communicate. She hadn't exactly explained how.

"Mal?" Ben asked, hoping that it would work.

A bright light appeared on one portion of the stone, at the twelve o'clock position from where he was standing. It traveled counter-clockwise until the entire perimeter of the bowl was lit, and then the surface of the water shimmered, became smooth, and took on a silver-tone so that he couldn't even see the bottom of the bowl. Colors bloomed across the surface of the water, and a picture formed. A water sprite appeared, looking just as surprised as he was.

"It worked?" Ben asked himself, stuck in shock.

The water sprite gurgled in return.

"Can you find Mal?" Ben asked. "Um, er, the queen?"

Ben couldn't quite tell what happened on the other side of the bowl, but through a series of unintelligible grumbles and splashes, the sprite had soon managed to summon Mal. She appeared in a white jacket and blue jeans, smiling serenely as she peered both down and up at him. As she approached the picture, she shoved her hands deep in her pockets.

"Long time no see," She smiled. "How have you been?"

Ben spread his hands, even though he wasn't sure she could see them. "I've been running a kingdom, which I'm sure you can relate to."

Mal scoffed and rolled her eyes as she took a seat on the ground in the moorlands. Ben's reflection seemed to have appeared at the edge of a riverbank. He could see the blue sky behind the white barrier behind her head. Occasionally, little fairies flit by and the breeze blew multi-colored leaves into his field of vision. "You run one kingdom, Ben. I run two." She reminded him.

Ben shrugged. "Yeah, but both of your kingdoms are pretty good at caring for themselves at the moment. Mine is a bit like I'm ruling over thousands of toddlers who need my help twenty-four/seven."

Mal burst into laughter. Ben couldn't stop the dreamy feeling that crept down his spine as he watched her smile. She composed herself and then examined him with a sudden frown. "You look tired again." She commented, leaning forward slightly.

Ben sighed. Time for brutal honesty. He ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, about that, Fairy Godmother is making me tell you that… ever since you left, I haven't been able to sleep."

Mal blinked at him. "Since three days ago?" She asked slowly.

Ben shook his head. "No. I was like this last month too. Fairy Godmother thinks it's curse side effects."
Mal's expression turned glasslike. "Well, strictly speaking, we're lucky to have not already run into those." She mumbled. "You just... don't sleep?" She asked.

Ben nodded. "We're trying to figure out what's going on." He sighed. "Mom was actually wondering if there was something you could ask the Moorish people... how to stave it off or something?"

"There's not." Mal shook her head. "Curse side-effects... they'll just go away once we're with each other again. It's like a delayed presence response."

"Do you just know all this?" Ben yawned, turning his head away a little. "Sheesh, the things you just know."

"I asked last time," Mal admitted, turning a little red. "Because the truth is... I haven't exactly remained unscathed either."

"What do you mean?" Ben asked with a frown and a furrowed brow. "You don't look like you haven't been sleeping."

Mal swallowed and pulled her hands out of her pockets. She held them up in his frame of vision and Ben stared in shock. At the tips of her fingers - her middle and index ones especially - there was black... mold underneath her skin. It was less than an inch of black and really only extended to the tips of her nails, but definitely there. Grey tones were right underneath them, alerting Mal where it would next appear. It was solid black in color with little hints of green or brown on her skin. "I have this on my hands and on my feet. It grows slowly but goes away quickly once I'm back around you."

"Does it hurt?" Ben asked, pinching his lips together.

Mal shook her head. "Just makes it hard to move. So long as it doesn't reach my wrists before I have to drive back, I should be fine. It's worse on my feet. Already most of my toes are going black."

Ben put a hand to his head in disbelief. "That's awful." He whispered. "I am... so sorry."

"Not your fault." Mal shook her head. "It's mostly ignorable. I'm sorry about your sleeplessness though." She sighed and bit her cheek a little. "I wish I could fix that."

"I wish I could fix your hands." Ben slumped forward. "This isn't fun."

"It's a curse. It's not meant to be fun." Mal rolled her eyes and pulled her hands out of sight. She cleared her throat. "So, can you sleep at all?"

Ben sighed. "I pass out from exhaustion every so often, but for the most part I'm sluggishly awake and basically dying from sleep deprivation." He leaned his head on his fist as he watched her look down at her hands, twisting them carefully.

"You're sluggish anyway." Mal snickered.

Ben rolled his eyes. "You're the multi-colored one." He protested. This, to his disgrace, made Mal laugh even harder as she picked at her hair. The sunlight hit her hair in a pretty way that made her hair look like it was shining. She exhaled, and her lips formed a natural pout as she looked down at him sympathetically.

Ben was tired, but that didn't mean he was blind. He smiled softly as he looked at her. "Your hair is
even longer." He whispered. And it was. It was almost down to her waist. It seemed to be turning a lighter purple color too, and the weight was pulling it straight.

Mal looked back at him in surprise. "Oh. Yeah, it grows way fast whenever I'm here. The more the fairies play with it, the more it grows. It happens to my eyelashes and arm fuzz too. Look." She held up a forearm, which looked like it was lightly stained with purple from all the thin, natural purple hairs. Ben chuckled.

Mal smirked. "Bet that's a real turn-on for you, huh? Purple hair everywhere?" She crossed her arms, and the sunlight on her arms made her look like she was glowing.

Everywhere? The word echoed inside his head, reverberating into his skull. Ben's face went a bit slack. He looked away, then looked back up and met her eyes. "For sure." He confirmed. "You're a real catch, Mal."

She tried to flip her hair a little, but it was a little too long and heavy. "I am, aren't I?" She said sarcastically. "Even with the monstrous mother. But if you think I'm cool, you should meet my friend Evie. She's the fairest of them all."

Ben perked up at the mention of Mal's Isle friends. He wasn't sure if Mal could notice in the water, though. "Evie? Let me guess, daughter of Grimhilde?"

Mal stared. "I don't know that name." She said. "Evie's the daughter of the Evil Queen. She was my best friend on the Isle."

"That's cool," Ben said, filing the information away for later. "What was she like? Did she have colorful hair too?"

"Blue. And she's a fashionista." Mal frowned. "Why?"

Ben wilted. "Just… wondering. I'm always interested in hearing about the Isle." And it was true. Mal didn't talk about her past very much, but when she did Ben was always interested in hearing about the Isle - how it worked and who was who - it was fascinating. "How did you end up best friends with a fashionista?"

"She sort of... adopted us? Or rather she and Carlos were friends, and then I pulled Carlos into my circle after he made this thing - anyways, she came with him." Mal shrugged. "She was cool though. She made me my jacket."

"Who else was there?" Ben asked, leaning forward towards the reflection even more.

Mal thought hard for a few seconds. Then, she gave Ben a strange look. "Do you… have an Isle kink?" She asked slowly.

Ben's face erupted into red. "What?" He sputtered. "No… I don't think so? Why would you say that!" He covered his face with his hands.

"Like, a bad-girl thing!" She defended herself. "You do, don't you! That's why you're so fascinated by me doing magic and being Maleficent's kid." She laughed at how uncomfortable Ben was. "Okay, okay. I've probably given you enough to sleep on." Her smile faltered a tad. "I... wish it wasn't like this. If I hear anything, I swear I'll pass it along."

"Sounds good," Ben said, still covering his face as the last of the blush faded from his cheeks. He straightened up. "Love you."
Mal's exhaled and a shy smile stretched across her face. "Bye Ben. Be home safe soon." She blew him a kiss and closed the connection. The water in Ben's connection bowl turned back into its normal clear substance.

Ben emptied out the bowl. It was pretty impressive, he had to admit. He was definitely glad he had it.

Ericka's head was tilted down as she drew frost patterns with her finger on the dining table. Her bare feet were crossed underneath her chair. Next to her, Abigail was typing away on her phone and occasionally letting out a breathful of giggles and under-her-breath mutters.

As Ericka focused on doodling a large snowflake, there was a crash from outside the room. Down the hall, someone shrieked. "Ericka!" A female shouted. Ericka rolled her eyes and looked sideways at Abigail, who snorted and threw her legs over the armrest of her chair. She and Ericka locked eyes, and then simultaneously rolled them as the door burst open.

Queen Elsa appeared with a fistful of papers in her hand. Dark red sludge was dripping down her shoulders and off her blonde hair, though she appeared to have survived the brunt of the damage. Ericka frowned. She hadn't timed the tripwire well enough, then. And that was one of her favorites. It was how she'd gotten her boyfriend to dump her.

Elsa slapped the papers down on the dining table and slammed her hand down onto the table. A thick layer of solid ice appeared across the entire length of the table, immediately wiping away Ericka's frosty doodles. Ericka slumped her posture and stared up at her mom as Elsa pulled off a fistful of red sludgy dye. She shook her fist at Ericka with a tight lip.

"Don't blame me." Ericka shrugged. "Fool you once, shame on me, but this is like, the ninth time. So, shame on you."

Elsa continued pulling slimy fistfuls of dye off of her dress. Her skin looked like she had burn scars across it. She launched her hand towards Ericka and rubbed the slime into her hair. Ericka shrieked and tried to bat her mom aside as Elsa rubbed her stained hands over Ericka's cheeks and shoulders, covering as much of her as she could. "Mom!" She screamed. Snow started to fall and Ericka could feel control of her powers slipping out of her hands.

A sneeze welled up inside of her nostrils. She took a breath, and then a loud sneeze escaped her like a bullet from a gun. A spontaneous winter wind appeared in front of her, and she was swept backward, knocking her chair into the ground and skidding across the flooring before hitting the wall with a thud.

Abigail leaned out of her chair, looking impressed as Elsa doubled over laughing. "That was a big one." Her cousin snorted. "I think you could outshoot the cavalry."

"Shut up," Ericka grumbled, getting to her feet and rubbing her nose a little.

"Payback." Elsa rolled her eyes and went to help Ericka up. "Oh, snowflake, where are your shoes?"

"I think they're hanging from the roof again," Ericka replied sarcastically, standing up and pulling a bit of goop off of her cheek before dropping it onto Elsa's bare shoulder. "I actually don't know. Abigail, did I even put shoes on today?"

Abigail shrugged and grumbled a little. "Ugh." She complained about something on her phone.
"What?" Elsa asked, raising an eyebrow at her niece as she picked Ericka's chair. "Who's broken up with who now?"

"No one," Abigail replied unhappily. "I just forgot that the queen was gone again this month. Her blog is dead and it's sad." She turned her phone around and Ericka glimpsed the official palace page. A photo of Queen Mal with an arm leading off the photo, presumably holding her phone out, and the other around King Ben's shoulders. He was raising an eyebrow at the camera, but looking at her. Queen Mal's eyes were lit up with something mischievous.

Elsa craned her neck and laughed at the caption attached to the photo. "She's got quite the sense of humor. Not too different from Kristoff." She hesitated, and then picked up the papers that she'd slapped down. "Queen Mal..." she trailed off. "Abigail, have you talked to her at all?"

"Why are you interrogating everyone on the royal couple?" Ericka wrinkled her nose and sat back down.

"A bit." Abigail nodded. "I have her number somewhere. "She's super funny. I like her a lot."

"And what's her stance on magic?" Elsa asked, squinting down at the papers in her hand. Her dress made cracking sounds where the dye was starting to dry.

"She loves it." Abigail shrugged. "To be honest, I think she's performing more than the palace is letting on. I don't think it's a moor-exclusive thing. At least not anymore."

"Why do we care about the royal family?" Ericka groaned, leaning her chair back to balance on two legs. "It's not like we talk to them anyways."

Elsa turned the pages around and handed them to Ericka. "Practice for the future. What do you do when the King of Auradon sends you something like this?"

Ericka took the pages and examined them with a critical eye. They appeared to be prints of a private email that had been received that morning. Ericka skimmed the message and then stared at the page in wonder and confusion. Abigail tried craning over her shoulder.

"King Ben sent this?" Ericka asked her mom, raising an eyebrow at the blonde queen. "Regarding the national laws against magic?" Elsa nodded and took the pages back. Ericka let them slip out of her hands, shock filling her.

Elsa examined the pages and then folded them into fourths. She hummed quietly. "Abigail, did you say you had her number?"

Ericka's mouth dropped open. "You," she began, staring at her mom incredulously, "are going to call the Queen? You?"

"She's in the moorlands." Abigail reminded them. "No service outside Auradon's barrier."

"What about Ben's number?" Elsa asked, tucking her papers under her arm carefully, avoiding the red dye.

"I have... Audrey's. She could probably give me his number." Abigail shrugged. "But... shouldn't his number be in the joint royal database? You should already have him in your contacts."

"I don't keep up with Auradon's social hierarchy." Elsa waved her hand at her niece. "Can you get the number for me, please?"
"Err, I'll do my best." Abigail agreed, nodding carefully. Ericka stared at her mother in shock. She could count the number of times Elsa had spoken to dignitaries outside of the palace, either by phone or travel (the latter being a solid zero). If people wanted to talk to Elsa, they came to her. That was just the way it worked.

Elsa brushed her bangs out of her face and a glob of slime fell to the floor. She examined her daughter's face. "I think it may be time to break the binds of silence," she mumbled and then turned to walk towards the door. Her cane made gentle taps on the floor as she walked. Before she disappeared, she stopped and frowned back at Ericka. "Cancel your trip to Motunui; you're grounded."

Ericka's mouth dropped open as Elsa disappeared. "That's so uncool!" she shouted after her mom.

The smog levels were slowly rising back up into the barrier as the temperature rose. Evie stayed beneath the awning. She wasn't sure if the pollution in the air would turn to scorching levels once the sun started to heat the barrier. It wasn't like the barrier would allow the sun to actually hit the ground, but the particles in the air were still dangerous.

Evie stared across the sea towards Auradon. She couldn't see much. Only the faint outlines of the coast and the hills in the distance. But she could see the sunshine hitting the water from where the barrier crossed into the sea, and she imagined she could see birds and cars and people down on the coastline. She wondered if Mal could see the Isle from the palace. Her guess was no, since she couldn't even make out the forms of any buildings.

A rock hit the wall beside her head. She snapped her attention across the alley where two short kids with long, unbalanced swords tied clumsily onto their waists were laughing and goading her. "Princess!" They called, and Evie flinched. "Where's your prince?" They yelled. "He coming from Auradon? Or better yet, where's your queen?" They exploded into laughter, clapping each other on the back like they were hilarious. Evie turned and slipped into the shadows. They were pirate wannabe's, nobody important. She couldn't let them know how much the words stung.

Evie shortcut her way through the back alleyways and toward the outskirts of the Isle city. All too soon, she could smell the barrier river that surrounded the concrete structures Auradon had built almost thirty years ago. Behind it was the forest and the formerly abandoned lands.

A sharp cough from her left made her turn again. A boy with black and white hair had appeared out of the shadows of the building. "Gosh." He gasped. "The pollution is way worse this year."

Evie nodded and crossed her arms. "I wonder if this will be the year the death count is enough for Auradon to step in?" She said sarcastically.

Carlos crossed his arms and looked out over the river, and he knew they were both thinking about the same person. She swallowed. "Don't say it." She warned.

"Do you think she might be able to-" Carlos began nonetheless.

"Do you think the palace will let her do anything? She still doesn't even leave the palace unless they're carting her to and from her other kingdoms," Evie scoffed. Her stomach twisted. Poor, poor Mal. She chewed on her cheek and then glanced over the bridge. "Where's Jay?" She asked.

"His dad wanted him to find something for him," Carlos mumbled. "He might not be back yet."

At his words, a figure in dark red appeared on the other side of the river. Evie squinted and then exhaled. "Here he is." She mumbled.
Jay crossed the bridge over the river by holding his collar over his mouth. He went straight to them and then uncovered his mouth. Immediately, a hacking cough escaped his throat. "Sorry." He whispered. "Evie, here." He outstretched his hand and dropped a collection of heavy Auradon coins into her palm. "They said that it was some of the best quality they'd ever seen." Evie nodded and swallowed as she tucked the coins away in a secret pocket in her jacket.

She'd crafted a leather jacket to protect one of the workers from the pollution. They'd been trading with the Auradon workers since they'd first arrived, though they tried to keep out of sight and didn't give out their names.

"What are they working on now?" Carlos asked. He looked over Jay's shoulder to the distance where the walls of the city rose up over the woods. Evie frowned as she tried to comprehend what she was looking at. There seemed to be something large and bright rising up over the wall. Something like...

"Is that a building?" She asked.

"They're shooting up buildings." Jay nodded. "Like I told you. I guess... the crown is actually following through on their crazy idea."

"How many?" Carlos asked, glancing cautiously towards the towering buildings.

"Lots," Jay replied. "Nine giant buildings and lots and lots of smaller houses. They all look the same except for the numbers." He pulled on his sleeves a little and swallowed. "They have roads stretching down to the beach and a temporary dock set up on the edge. The walls... they stretch all the way into the ocean, and in two weeks they're going to permanently block off the rest of the Isle."

Evie scoffed. "How do they expect to do that? Everyone knows how to climb walls." And really, that was the big thing Evie didn't understand about this whole excursion. How could Auradon expect all these bright, new, sturdy buildings to stay nice and white when they were being built for villains. People like Maleficent or her mom would just come in and take over.

Jay wrung his hands. "Apparently, Mal, or the palace at least, has... a plan."

"Don't say her name." Evie flinched. "What's the crown going to do to show the Isle goodwill now?"

"They're removing the barrier," Jay admitted. Carlos's mouth dropped open with a pop. Jay swallowed and kept going. "They're going to pop it," he made a popping motion with his hands, "and then reform it with a double layer. Around the old places, no one goes in and no one goes out. Around the new places, no one leaves the area without a paper from the Queen. And where the two places touch, they'll have a system so people in the new place can go back and forth."

Evie blinked. "Wow. They're going to let her issue her own statements?"

"Apparently." Jay breathed. "Maybe they've got King Useless signing off in her name. But either way, that's how it'll work." Jay let out a deep, deep breath. "They're playing her like she's a little puppet up in that palace. Everyone who's gone to work for the builders are convinced that she's coming up with this immaculate plan to heal the Isle and make everyone good. God! They're so blind."

"It's exactly the sort of thing Auradon would do." Evie agreed sadly. "Take her out every once in a while, show her off to the public... then hide her away again until next time."
"They're not the only ones who are blinded." Carlos sniffed. "Maleficent's still loopy. She still thinks Mal's just playing their trust." At their friend's name, Evie closed her eyes in pain.

"Does she?" Evie asked. "She's been rather... tame the last few months. Ever since the moorlands changed crowns. She's just been... quiet."

"I think she's holding out on her daughter doing something." Carlos shook his head. "I don't see why she's holding her breath. Maleficent has always been a bit loopy. But she doesn't come out of her room much anymore, so I think we're... mostly okay."

"At least until she tries to sell the next one of us to Auradon." Jay scoffed. Evie snorted in agreement. Carlos nodded along with them. Jay's nails were curling into his skin as he closed his eyes in pain. Without him saying a word, Evie could imagine what he was thinking. King Ben's iron grip closing on their friend's arm, leading her away into a dark, chain-filled room. Faceless servants putting her in pretty dresses to parade around in front of the royals while faceless soldiers brandished their weapons in case she made the slightest mistake. Mal gasping in pain under his cold, cruel hands. The images were almost too painful to be considered.

"What about the rest of the Isle?" Carlos asked. Evie turned to Jay, who shook his head.

"I don't think they're touching it." He informed them, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "It's either accept Auradon's beta system or remain in squalor. Be a villain or be a hero. What a choice."

"Well, Auradon is all about making fair choices regarding the villains." Carlos rolled his eyes. "They only pull seventeen-year-olds away and force them into positions of power to manipulate us."

Jay fell silent. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, and then Evie glanced at him. "Is there something else?" She whispered.

Jay nodded and Evie heard the rustle of paper in his pocket as he dug his nails into his thighs. He looked up at the thick, dark clouds around the inside of the barrier and exhaled slowly. "They'll be fixing the barrier from the inside. Fairy Godmother will be coming over, and they're going to redo everything from the new place. And when they do it, they'll bring her over to help. Mal's going to come back to the Isle."

"Think she'll make a break for it?" Evie asked. Her heartbeat quickened at the idea.

"Where would she go?" Jay asked. "It's not like she can, you know, leave forever. They'd find her eventually." He paused. "King Useless would have someone haul her back. He wouldn't just let his... trophy go." Jay pulled his hands out of his pockets and crossed his arms in defense. As much as it hurt, Evie guessed that Jay was right. But still, maybe if they could see her, maybe she could send them a message or something. Maybe they could help... by slitting the King's throat when his back was turned.

"Well." She whispered. "We'll have to see what happens."

A horrible crash echoed from the buildings behind them and someone screamed as something rock crashed to the ground. The three VK's spun around. Dust was drifting into view, and someone was yelling in agony. Something, presumably part of a building, had fallen. "Let's get out of here," Carlos whispered. Without a single second lost, the three turned and began slipping through the shadows, away towards their hideout.

After about a week, Ben had sent and received several letters from the former magic users he had
written to. Unfortunately, the answers were varied. Some of the magic users had simply had difficulty adjusting, but others had suffered severe withdrawals and had been forced to attend several different types of physical therapies to learn to function without the constant flow around. Many people, like Mal, had felt more at peace with the world, and it was hard for them to get over being in touch with everything. The Fairy Godmother was infinitely helpful as she explained the differences in magical creatures and how some literally had withered away or fled Auradon when the laws had gone out.

He consulted Mal in the moors, who communed with the creatures there and helped him garner information on what exactly happened to magical creatures who couldn't use magic. Before long, he had enough to start to outline a public proclamation.

"How does this sound?" Ben asked Mal one night, sitting down on a stool in the bathroom and setting a glass of cognac on the bathroom counter. He didn't dare glance in the mirror. He could only imagine the dark red and blue colors around his eyes. "We here at the palace agree that magic should be considered an individual talent with particular affinity. Those who possess the ability should have the right to express themselves and pursue knowledge on this branch of affinity." He glanced up for her reaction and found her smiling at him, eyes sparkling, and a pretty color appearing in her cheeks.

"It's good." Mal nodded. Then her smile abruptly faded. "But... does the public have any idea you're about to do this? You may shock them. It is your first big proclamation after all."

Ben shrugged, setting down his rough draft on the bathroom counter. "It's time. We need to make these changes. I don't want to wait to do a good thing. But...you're right, I guess. But how can I break it to them any easier than this?"

Mal shrugged. "I dunno. This is really hefty, though. You haven't done anything like this, and you've only been king for a little while. Also..." Mal chewed her lip in thought. "You kind of have a magical wife. You're going to be considered biased."

Ben sighed dejectedly. He looked over all his scribbles, sincerely disheartened. "You're right, of course." He agreed. "And the last thing I want to do is cast you in a bad light or have everyone think you're spelling me."

Mal nodded. "Maybe... we start off small? The kingdom needs to trust both of us as a whole, as a team." She took a deep breath and brushed her bangs out of her face. The tips of her fingers up to the second knuckle were back. "Listen, I'm already a puppet queen of your kingdom, and I don't want more. But I'm still, technically, Auradon's queen. I need to have a good relationship with your people."

"So..." Ben urged, sensing she already had an end goal in mind.

Mal twiddled her thumbs. "I may be spending even less time at the palace." She coughed a little. "I want to be among the people; to help them out. Go to service activities and social gatherings and such. Maybe schools and other places."

Ben blinked. His immediate response was to say: 'no' or remind her that he had his current ailments. Already, he was despairing inside. He missed her. Instead, he swallowed. "Okay." He said.

"Okay?" Mal asked nervously. "You look like you're going to be sick."

"Well..." Ben stopped himself, then continued. "I already miss you a lot, is all. And, you know,
my crazy sleeplessness is a problem. I don't think I can do this forever."

Mal swallowed. She twiddled her thumbs. "Listen… I have something to tell you. It's a little…
crazy, but I've been practicing." She stood straight. "I think it'll work. I'll show you in person when
I get back."

Ben felt a muscle in his jaw tighten without his command. "I can't wait." He told her honestly. "Is it
magical?" Mal rolled her eyes.

"Yes, it is." She admitted, smiling at his obvious interest.

Ben couldn't deny he dug his nails into his palms as a large smile strung across his face. "Sweet!
Hurry home, then."

Mal smiled. "I'm going to go now." She said. "Bye!"

"Goodbye." Ben waved and the connection fizzled out. He picked up his glass and took a sip as he
smiled quietly to himself. Goodness gracious, she was amazing. And he swore the more time she
spent around magic, the better looking she got. Maybe it was just her being in her element or an
actual magic side effect, but she looked like the goddess of beauty - a physical embodiment of
everything beautiful in the world. The kind of beauty she had made his heart pound and his clothes
warm and made him want to treat her like some ethereal sort of treasure. A dangerous treasure who
was talented with a sword, but a treasure nonetheless. Ben wished she was there so he could thread
his fingers through his and pull her flush against his frame and run his hands across her-

Maybe she was just getting older.

He winced back at the thought and found himself raising his glass to his mouth. Because, of
course, that was an equally plausible explanation for her inhuman beauty. Though he couldn't
remember ever seeing someone like her, it could always just be that she was getting older, and he
was appreciating the view more and more because he was, officially, head over heels for her.

Ben knocked his glass back, berating himself silently. "She's young. She's free. She's not going to
be here forever and she doesn't need you thinking anything towards her. So stop, Ben." As he felt
the deary drowning feeling wash into his head and over his thoughts, he closed his eyes and
allowed himself one last image of her. Purple, smiling, confident, happy. With her short legs curled
up underneath her and the sunlight hitting her arms and her clothes falling over her curves and her
eyes boring into his soul. Just the way he wished she could be all the time. Just mesmerizing and
happy. Because above all, he wanted that carefree smile to stay with her. And the truth was
becoming more and more clear - he'd die to keep her happy.

"Hey, Ben." Someone said as they knocked on the open door to his office. Ben looked up to see
Doug with a castle servant pushing a dolly behind him.

"Hey, Doug," Ben said, gathering up a questionable report from the far north. One of Zootopia's
patrol ships had been randomly pulled into the sea without a trace. No radio call had been sent out,
and no wreckage had been found. It had simply vanished. "What are you doing? What's all that
stuff?"

"Upgrades," Doug explained as the castle servant wheeled the dolly into the room and tipped his
cap at the king. Ben smiled and waved back. "We put in an order for a larger computer for both
you and Mal. Hers is much different from yours since I noticed she doesn't like the large-screen
concept as much as you and your dad, but you're both getting new upgrades. Guess what that
means?"

"What?" Ben asked dubiously as Doug began to cut open the top box on the dolly.

"It means I get your desk for the next four hours while I set this up. You'll have to work elsewhere. Bye." Doug waved at Ben with a proud smile.

Ben laughed. "You're enjoying this way too much, Doug." He told his old friend as he gathered up a few pens and the papers he'd been working on and began to vacate his desk.

Doug shrugged and chuckled. "It's not often I get the opportunity to boss the king out of his office. Let me have my fun." Several large pieces of packaging landed on the floor as he continued work.

Ben laughed and moved out of Doug's way as Doug revealed a larger, sleeker desktop screen. "Fancy." Ben laughed.

"Absolutely." Doug whistled. "This is straight-up fancy stuff." He set to work unplugging Ben's current system and dismantling it.

Ben was going to sit down in a corner of the room to watch and work until he felt his phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He fished out the thin screen, and the last remnants of his smile faded into confusion as he glimpsed the name on the phone screen.

"What's up?" Doug asked as he watched Ben stare at his phone.

"Huh. Nothing bad. It's just… Queen Elsa is calling me." Ben explained. Doug paused, and then put down the screen on Ben's desk in confusion. Ben shrugged and answered the call. He held the phone to his cheek, not entirely sure what to expect. "Hello, Benjamin Benson speaking, how can I help you?"

There was an icy laugh and chuckle on the other end that reminded Ben of snow falling off the palace roof. "Well, if that isn't the humblest greeting a king has ever issued," Elsa said. "This is Elsa, queen of Arendelle."

"Hello, Elsa. It's nice to hear from you. How are you doing?" Ben asked as he headed out of his office and into the hallway, so Doug could continue work.

"I'm well, and you? I haven't seen you since before you graduated." Elsa asked.

"Yes, not since Arendelle hosted the Summer Solstice. We're well. Is Arendelle okay? Anything I can help you with?" Ben asked. He stifled a yawn and tried to not sound like he was about to fall over.

"Arendelle is well," Elsa confirmed. "I - actually am calling today about a bit of a curious request."

"Yes?" Ben asked as he wandered down the hall and through the corridors, making sure to pick places with good reception.

"I saw you were married recently, to Queen Mal of course, and that she has two kingdoms of her own, the Isle and the Moors." Elsa started. "And… I was curious, it was mentioned in your interview a few months ago that she can perform magic, and I assumed she would be bound by the same laws as everyone, but then you sent me a letter about a week ago asking what happens when magicals refrain from magic… and I was curious, is the Queen of Auradon being allowed to perform magic?"
"Uhm." Ben stuttered for a second. "It's... a delicate situation. She has to perform magic to sustain her kingdom of the Moors but in Auradon... we haven't decided what to do, um, in Auradon?"

"Will the laws against magic be abdicated?" Elsa asked.

Ben sighed. If only it were that simple. "I hope someday, but she and I agreed that if I release something of that magnitude right now, the kingdom will think she's manipulating me or that I'm biased."

"Smart decision." Elsa sighed, though she seemed disappointed.

Ben laughed. "I don't know why you're so upset, Elsa. I figure the entire kingdom is aware you've been practicing magic since we said not to."

"Worst-kept secret." Elsa agreed cautiously.

"I'm not reprimanding," Ben chuckled. "To be honest, I think that the laws against magic are a serious wrong. Especially since magical items such as enchanted carriages and magical plants and animals are so common. We have lots of magical barriers set up as well. It just seems so silly to have restricted using it when we use enchanted items so much. Not to mention it's about the same idea as saying 'We hereby ban all performing arts or mathematicians. You're no longer allowed to use your skills.'"

"Magic is an aid." Elsa agreed. "It took me many years to learn that. When used wrongly, as in Maleficent's case, it is dangerous, but when used rightfully, an immense tool for good."

"Agreed," Ben confirmed.

"On Mal being over the Isle of the Lost, will she be letting villains into Auradon?" Elsa asked.

"No. I'm still King, so she'd have to ask me, for one. For two, she recognizes the danger it poses, and already has an immense level of love for her citizens in Auradon." Ben smiled to think about Mal puzzling over how to be the best queen she could be.

"You speak of her fondly," Elsa said with a smile.

"I do." Ben agreed. He couldn't bother trying to hide the smile creeping into his tone. Let everyone know he was in love – he didn't care.

"Could I meet her?" Elsa asked softly.

Ben blinked and his mouth fell open a little. Elsa didn't exactly venture out of her kingdom all that often, and he wasn't sure he and Mal had the time at the moment to leave. "What did you have in mind?" He asked cautiously.

"I would be willing to visit, given you and she are busy between the three kingdoms," Elsa said. "There's not been a magical queen like her and me since the time of the villains. I'm eager to converse with her, to see how she plans to shape the Moors and the Isle."

His brain flatlined. Elsa... coming to visit. Outside of Arendelle. Ben took a deep breath and then relaxed. Visits he could do. He could do those just fine. "That would be lovely." He said. "Unfortunately, Mal is at the moors right now, and will return on the first of April."

"Would it be okay if I arrive around April sixth? I promise to not bring any snow with me on the way to your castle." Elsa asked teasingly.
Ben laughed. "I know you wouldn't, not that you wouldn't be able to immediately take it away anyway. I think that Mal would love that, to be honest. I'll expect you on the sixth."

"Alright. Thank you, Ben." Elsa said.

"My pleasure. See you soon." Ben hung up and stared at his phone. He couldn't believe he'd just had that conversation. He took a deep breath and walked back into the room. Doug was unraveling cords beneath the desk.

"What did Elsa say?" He asked as he glimpsed Ben walking past the desk.

"Wanted to ask if she could come and meet Mal," Ben responded as he went to sit in his corner. "How's it coming?"

"Well. She wanted to come and meet Mal?" Doug asked, peeking up long enough to raise an eyebrow at Ben before he returned to uncoiling wires.

"Yeah. Here, at the palace. I think there's a sentimental thing behind it… she doesn't know many other magical people." Ben responded as he started to reread the problem with the missing boat.

"Neither does Mal." Doug reasoned around a grunt. "This is good. Elsa never was a hundred-percent united with the kingdom. Maybe this will help convince her to be a little more proactive in politics?"

"Elsa is proactive in politics." Ben rolled his eyes. "You can't avoid politics as easily as she does by simply ignoring that they exist. I think the fact her daughter and niece are as, ahem, dramatic as they are, helps keep the spotlight off of her."

Doug was silent for a few seconds. The only sounds were of wires rustling and Ben scribbling on his report. Then, Doug coughed and said: "Poor Ericka has always been a news story. It's probably gotten easier for Elsa to ignore the public since they found out about her."

Ben frowned. "That's not very nice to say." He said though it was true. Ericka was one of the few children whose other parent was unknown. Elsa had never said more than a few words on the subject of her father, and the subject was as secretive as Elsa's powers had been as she'd grown up.

Ben couldn't see Doug, but he was sure the older man shrugged. The room faded into silence, and Ben returned to the problem at hand with more than a small headache.

---

On March thirty-first, Ben was staring across the room in the dark. When he put his hand up in the air in front of him, there was no shadow. It was almost like the darkness made him invisible. He yawned, and examined the ceiling, tracing patterns with his eyes. As he traced the outline of a mess of lines with his eyes, he heard the handle to the door twist open and looked over. The door slid open and two glowing green orbs appeared along with a rush of cool air. Ben said nothing as Mal crept into the room with nothing to guide her through the darkness but the soft green light behind her eyes. Mal set her bag and suitcase beside the door to be unpacked the next day and slipped into the closet to quickly get changed into pajamas. Ben waited without a word, his eyes growing heavier and heavier.

Minutes later, Mal slipped underneath the covers beside him. The first thing he did was reach for her. He rolled over to face her and reached out to brush her face as she smiled.

Her eyes lit up with magic.
Ben pulled her closer to him and kissed her forehead. The tips of her ears were black and her hands had black covering them. He twined their fingers together and watched her pale skin quickly reappear. "Missed you." He whispered and yawned.

She patted his head gently and whispered: "Goodnight."

With her command and, it seemed, permission, Ben faded into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Cinderella, Frozen, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Aladdin, 101 Dalmations, or Zootopia.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

--Longest Chapter so far--
Mal covers for Ben at a Royal Event and meets some of his old friends. Queen Elsa arrives at Beast's Castle. Mal restructures the barrier with Fairy Godmother at her side.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was already awake when he opened his eyes. They looked across the pillows at each other for a few seconds and Ben realized she was still being held rather close to him. Not up against him, but still, rather close. He slowly unwrapped his arms, not lingering on her skin at all, and yawned. "How long have you been up?" He whispered, rubbing his eyes and then stretching his shoulders a little bit.

"A while." Mal murmured. "You slept for a long time."

"Got to catch up." Ben chuckled. He examined her features – her vibrant eyes and flawless skin. "You look good." He mumbled, throat a little tight as her beauty twisted his emotions around and made him feel tense.

Mal shrugged and slumped a little deeper into the pillows, closing her eyes. Her long lashes brushed her cheekbones. "It's just the Moorish effect." She yawned. "Being around magic helps me feel better."

Ben nodded and cupped her cheek a little before he found one of her hands buried in the covers and examined it. Her fingers were pale and mobile again. Mal opened an eye at him as he examined her fingers and then sat up. Ben's mouth fell open with a pop as a long curtain of hair came into view around her shoulders. "Wow." He gasped, dropping her hand and reaching out to pull a long, long lock of hair over her shoulder. "That's… wow."

"I know; it's so long." Mal yawned. And it was. Her long, thick hair was piled around her waist, meaning it was now longer than her entire torso. Ben's mouth remained open as he ran his eyes over the length of it all. Then, when Mal shifted a little underneath his gaze, he swallowed and returned his gaze to her hands.

"Do your fingers hurt at all?" He frowned. "I know you said it didn't, but-"

"They're sore now." Mal cut him off with a yawn. "Because I haven't moved them." She pushed the covers back and pulled the leg of her pants up to examine her feet. Ben flinched a little when he saw lingering streaks of grey across her skin. "My feet got it way worse this time around." She yawned. "When all the way up to my knees. Oh well, it'll be gone before tonight." She brushed her pant leg down and then felt around for her phone on the bedside table. "What do we have today?"

"Is it too much to agree to take a day off together?" Ben yawned. He watched Mal curl her toes as an experiment. Her nose wrinkled.
"I brought plants that need to go to the Isle." Mal yawned. "So I need to get there myself or get someone to take it for me. And the Fairy Godmother and I have a meeting coming up to discuss restructuring the barrier." She began flipping through her phone calendar with a lazy eye. "It looks like that's on the third, though. Hey – what's this on the sixth?" She leaned over and held her phone out underneath his face. Ben frowned and squinted at the screen.

"Oh." He shrugged and smiled cheekily at Mal. "Queen Elsa of Arendelle is leaving her palace for the first time in over twenty years because she's interested in meeting the new magical queen of Auradon." He elbowed her. Mal's mouth dropped open. Queen Elsa wanted to meet her? That idea seemed… preposterous.

"Oh." She swallowed nervously, and then looked back down at her screen. She looked over her plans for today and shrugged. "I actually don't have anything but… are you double-booked?"

A cold weight settled into Ben's stomach. He looked over her shoulder at the schedule for that day and then cursed. Mal blinked in shock as he spun to his nightstand and picked up his phone to begin flipping through it. "Shoot!" He exclaimed, squeezing his eyes shut. "I am double-booked. I must have done it while I was sleep deprived. Oh, god, what am I going to do?"

"Just reschedule it." Mal shrugged. "If I were you, I'd move the meeting here to-"

"I can't. The meeting is regarding the upcoming tax day when all the royals have to present proceedings of their finances over the year. It's an annual event. No rescheduling. All of the officials have to have their papers in by nine tonight. The problem is I agreed to go to Auradon Accelerated as part of their fairytale week, where they celebrate all the history that led up to the formation of Auradon. You know, the Hero age." Ben slumped against the headboard and banged his head lightly against the wood. "Oh, what am I going to do?"

Mal drummed her fingers on the sheet. "Are they both events you have to go to?"

"Member of the royal party." Ben sighed, covering his face with his hands. "And I'm the only person who's a member. My parents don't count anymore since they officially stepped down. And you… actually, you might count." He uncovered his face and stared at her. "You're not on the throne of Auradon but… I think you still qualify because you're the consort queen, linked to me, and I'm coronated." Ben sat up and faced her, sticking his lip out a tad. "Is there any way you'd be willing to cover an event for me?"

Mal blinked, and her entire frame went tense. "Me?" She asked. "Cover something for Auradon?"

"It won't happen again, I swear." Ben jutted his lips out a little further and softened his eyes. "Please? Just this once?"

"I don't know how to cover for Auradon." Mal stammered, clenching the sheets they were sitting on in her fists. "What would I do? If I mess up, it'll reflect badly on you."

"You won't mess up, and no one would even think more on it," Ben assured her. "You could do the Auradon Accelerated event, and there'll be lots of people there. Didn't you say you wanted to get more acquainted with the people? There's a small speech to be delivered, and then people might ask you questions. It'll kind of be like a meet and greet."

"Speech?" Mal asked. She felt a bit like she might faint.

"I have it typed already," Ben assured her. "Of course, I did it last week when I was dead inside, but it still should be okay. Please, Mal? And I swear I'll do my best to keep you from ever having
Mal forced herself to take a deep breath and nodded. "Okay." She whispered softly. "I guess I can do it. But you owe me one."

"Name your price," Ben affirmed, looking relieved. "Oh, goodness, thank you Mal."

Mal snorted at his thanks and sighed. "I don't know what I want yet. But I'll think of something and let you know." She swallowed and climbed off of the bed. Ben mirrored her movements and they quickly straightened out the sheets and pillows a little bit, knowing that the servants would come through anyways, and then Mal fumbled to plug her phone back in while Ben walked to his closet and picked out a blue plaid shirt. He could tell her hands were shaking, even from a distance.

He shut the closet door and pulled his shirt off over his head, buttoned up the blue one, and then found some slacks and dress shoes. When he'd finished getting dressed, he opened the door and took a few steps towards Mal's closet. "Mal?" He asked, and then stopped in his tracks. Her door to the closet hadn't swung shut all the way, and he could see the mark of Maleficent on her shoulder as she was reaching up without a shirt to pull something down from a higher level. Her white skin was even smoother than the surface of milk, and an even paler color. He quickly pulled the door handle shut and then took a deep, slow breath.

"Yeah, Ben?" Mal asked from inside. She didn't sound too concerned. She probably just assumed he hadn't seen anything and was just pulling her door shut out of courtesy. Ben swallowed. His mouth felt dry and he took a little breath.

"Want to walk down to breakfast together?" Ben asked. His voice didn't betray him. He sounded calm and collected.

"Sure." Mal agreed, hidden behind the door. She opened the door, still straightening a dark purple shirt with green applique on her frame. Ben stared at her waistline and caught glimpses of even more flawless skin as she straightened her hemline and then looked up at him.

"You look great." Ben smiled, though he suddenly sounded a bit stifled. He cleared his throat and gestured broadly to the doorway. "Shall we?" He asked. Mal smiled and nodded, and then together they left the room.

Auradon Accelerated was Auradon's primary college. It was located in San Fransokyo and was the largest school in the country. While it wasn't the only college, it was certainly the most renowned. They offered hundreds of courses, had an arsenal of staff and students, and the most advanced Science and Technology labs in the country. Which made sense because Hiro Hamada was the dean of the college, and he used the labs in his offtime.

As the limo pulled up to the southside entrance and then onto the campus, students crowded around the car. Technically, you weren't supposed to be driving on the paved walkways, but this was for Fairytale Week, and the palace had been specially approved to take whatever royal member was visiting straight to the center of the grounds. Mal swallowed as a group of college students with Native markings reminiscent of Pocahontas on their faces and arms pointed to the limo in excitement. People were filming. She wondered how the world would react to her being on her own to a public event. And her first public event, really, since she'd been married and coronated as Isle Queen.

A large fountain marked the center of campus. Four walkways spread north, south, east, and west, ready to guide visitors to wherever they needed to do. On the grassy expanse of the section
immediately North and West of the fountain was, a large temporary stage had been set up and a couple of news cars were waiting to air the college's live event to the country.

Mal felt the car come to a halt and heard Stewart, her ever-faithful escort, open his door. He walked around the car as people gathered around outside. Mal took a little breath, squeezing her printed speech in her palm and heard her handle click. Stewart opened the door, and Mal stepped out and into the light. Immediately, the world exploded into sound. She tried to gauge the people's reaction to her presence as Stewart shut the door behind her, confirming to everyone Ben's absence. They gave her a wide berth. Some people looked shocked and concerned. Other looked absolutely ecstatic to see her.

Mal smiled and waved a little at the crowds. A black-haired man, whose hair looked a bit like it was made of wispy puffs of smoke, took a few steps forward. "Queen Mal!" He exclaimed, stepping forward and holding his arms out like they were old friends. Mal fumbled her hands. Was she supposed to shake his hand at all? They exchanged a quick hug even though Mal had no idea who she was hugging, and then the man extended her hand and shook it enthusiastically.

"Hiro Hamada." The man introduced himself. "It is absolutely a pleasure to have you here, your highness. Thank you for making the trip out."

Mal's mouth broke into a smile. Oh, of course. "Thank you for having me!" She exclaimed with a laugh. "But, um, it's just Mal. No 'highness' here." She waved her hand above her head a little to draw attention to her height, and then Hiro offered her his arm with a laugh. Mal took it even though she didn't really care to be on his arm. It wasn't like she had too much of a choice. If she walked away, the tabloids would have a field day. "You're my husband's favorite story, after his parents. He's your biggest fanboy!"

Hiro burst into laughter, as did the surrounding crowds. Mal smiled. She could picture Ben's mortification when he got out of his meeting and learned what she'd said. "I'm serious!" She insisted. "He is obsessed with Big Hero Six. I think I've seen that movie nine times already because of him, and I still haven't seen Sleeping Beauty once."

Hiro began to lead her through the crowds. "I'm happy to hear that." He smiled. "He should take a trip out here to see us sometime. We'd be happy to show him around the labs and everything. After all, this is where a lot of it happened!" He spread his arm across the grounds and paused in front of a brown-haired girl. "High five?" He asked, holding his free hand up to her.

She slapped his hand, and so Mal held out her hand across Hiro's chest. "I want one too!" She announced. The girl slapped his hand, looking like she'd struck gold, and Mal let Hiro go to keep giving High-fives to people as they approached the stage. Hiro hopped up and turned to help her up, but Mal climbed past him and then turned back to the crowd. She waved, and college students screamed in return. "I have a joke for you guys!" Mal offered. People edged closer to the stage as Mal cupped her hands beside her mouth.

"You all know the story of Captain Hook, right? With Peter Pan, and the pirates?" The crowd exchanged glances and quieted a little. Mal continued. "I happened to know him quite well on the Isle. His daughter used to be an ally, and his son had a brief thing with me before moving onto my arch nemesis. So I grew up knowing lots about Captain Hook. You know, where he lived, where he liked to hide out, the works. And here's where the joke comes in; can any of you guess where he liked to shop?"

Mal looked out over the crowd, smirking a little as people exchanged glances and mumbled to their friends. She raised her eyebrows, and then announced: "The second-hand store!"
The crowd burst into laughter, nodding and smiling as they realized the pun. Mal straightened up and turned back to Hiro, who was smiling in approval. He handed her a piece of paper with a thin, black pin stuck through it. "Microphone." He explained, and then removed a second one from his pocket. He took the paper off and pinned the mic through his shirt, under his collar. Mal did the same, and then he blew lightly on his mic. The sound echoed around campus. Mal tapped hers, and a sound like a clunking weight echoed behind it.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the twenty-fourth annual streaming of Auradon Accelerated's Fairytale Week event. This is an event where we celebrate the heroes of Auradon that helped to form the country and pay tribute to our leaders who currently work to keep peace in the land. Despite the fact the event is hosted by and is centered on our college here, everyone is Auradon has the opportunity to participate from all over Auradon via streaming services, online participation, and by visiting Auradon Accelerated. This year, on our opening day, we're pleased to be hosting several of our former heroes, including Snow White, Cinderella, Pinocchio, Quasimodo, and others. Notably, we are graced with the head queen of Auradon's presence, and she'll have to forgive me for using her title again so soon after she told me not to, Queen Mal of the Isle and Auradon." Hiro started to gesture to her and then smacked his head. "And the moorlands. Sorry, Queen Mal."

Mal laughed. Her voice echoed. "Well, thanks for having me, Hiro." She laughed. "It's actually pretty cool to be here. I… didn't know I'd be coming until this morning, and I had no idea that this was even a thing." She shrugged and turned back to face Hiro. "So, what do you guys do for the rest of the week. Tell me about the events."

Hiro looked a little startled, probably because she was probably supposed to have been briefed on all this before they put her on National TV, but he started talking. "We do this every year a month before exams to help students relieve stress and celebrate a little. All week long, there with be student and national citizen competitions. Firework shows are every night, a new roller coaster is built by the technology district and donated to the Auradon public plaza, and class by class students will unveil their year projects, resulting in dozens of shows of dance, art, technology, and so much else." He explained, smiling as Mal crossed her arms and nodded.

"So, it's themed exposition." She hummed. "Still, very cool. I approve. This is awesome. Okay, so I have a speech Ben told me I would have to give. Is that a now thing?" She looked over at Hiro, who nodded with mirth in his eyes. "Cool." She proclaimed and unfolded her paper.

She skimmed the page briefly, and her eyes fell almost completely out of focus. She found herself staring at a page of absolutely nothing of value. Ben's words were riddled with repetitions and generalized glorifying statements. She hummed and crumbled it. "My husband gave me absolutely nothing of value, and I refuse to read that." She sighed and clasped her hands together. Hiro looked very, very tense as he watched her shove her speech into her pocket and then exhale.

There had to be at least two-hundred people in front of her, all waiting. Some were exchanging glances and cautious looks. Many didn't trust her, but she'd go to the Underworld and die before she'd ever give a speech on how perfect Auradon was. "This really is an amazing event." She began, casting her eyes around the campus. "And I think it's cool. It's cool to remember history. It's cool to shoot for goals and to get the whole country participating in something this patriotic. Now, to be fair, I didn't grow up in Auradon. I'm not Auradonian." Mal paused to scoff, and then continued, "I don't even hold citizenship here and the palace still has to sponsor my residency. And if anything, I resent you all for starving my friends and my people, locking us all away."

The atmosphere grew very, very tense. Hiro was taking deep, calming breaths and rubbing his hands on his pants. Mal swallowed and continued. "I don't believe in the vision of Auradon much.
But let me talk to you about something I do believe in today." She shoved her hands deep into her pockets and sought out the cameras in the crowd. "I believe in progress. I believe in hard work, and I believe in being true to who you are. My mother taught me about all those things as I grew up, and I can't credit her too much, but I do credit her with my persistence. Because I learned how to work hard for other people, and I learned how to make things better around me as I went from her. I believe that each of us has the right, and a divine destiny to make the world better. And it is my personal philosophy that we have the right to demand the best of ourselves, to pull ourselves up out of the darkness and to work towards that over-shining goal of Happily-Ever-After. As individuals, we work to make each other's lives better, to reach out and strengthen each other, and to move forward. People change. Circumstances prevail against experience, but the magic of perseverance that's within each of us helps us continue to keep moving forward, to quote another one of my husband's heroes." She laughed as people smiled, remembering Cornelius Robinson.

Everyone was straightening up, nodding, and looking, overall, really impressed. Mal couldn't spot a single shady glance in the audience. "I believe we all work for a tomorrow that hasn't come yet. I believe we need each other to lift us up and strengthen each other, and I believe, overall, in hope." She clapped her hands together. "Maybe I don't love Auradon for the way they abused me. Maybe I'm the daughter of a villainess, and we have nothing in common, and you hate me for circumstances I had no say in. But we need each other to lift and strengthen each other, to work together. Every one of us is destined to change the future, and every one of us is destined to do it with a group of people by our sides. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a celebration I can get behind. When we celebrate our past, we're really preparing for the future. How many of you guys will one day be called back to this campus on Fairytale Week as the new Heroes of Auradon? So when you gather and you celebrate the people who've come, don't forget to celebrate yourselves. Because when we celebrate our heroes, we celebrate you as well."

Silence reigned and all noise was quashed as people nodded and smiled to themselves. Mal exhaled and saluted the cameras. "That's all I have for you guys. I think I'm here until three."

The crowd exploded into applause. Mal unpinned her microphone and then handed it back to Hiro with a smirk. "You thought I was going to bash Auradon, huh?" She asked.

"I was worried for a second." Hiro exhaled with a smile. "But you did amazing. I'm not even upset."

Mal bowed a little sarcastically and then sat down on the stage as people waved and called her name. "Howdy." She greeted a group of college friends who were dressed in themed outfits. One was a long, dark brown-haired girl with a sheath of swords who held out a fist. Mal fist-bumped her and tilted her head. "I like your eyes." She complimented. They were an almost-perfect almond shape.

"Thanks." She replied. "I'm Lonnie. This is Chad, Aziz, and I think our other friend Audrey was here a while ago, but she left." She looked around the crowd with a careless shrug. "Audrey?" Mal repeated.

"Yeah." Lonnie nodded. "We're all old friends of Ben. Audrey and Ben actually dated before you two got together, did you know that?"

Mal nodded and swallowed thickly. "Yes, I know." She agreed. "We've met."

"Yeah, of course." Lonnie nodded. "Anyways, Ben and I used to do swords together. He was captain at Auradon Prep, and then I took his crown after he had to buckle down and start being king. He mentioned he spars with you sometimes, so I want to try you on for size." Lonnie held
aloft the bag of swords.

Mal raised her eyebrows. "Sounds fun." She smiled and pulled a sword out of the bag. She sniffed at it. "I wish I had Ben's sword though."

"His pretty one with the golden guard?" Lonnie laughed. Mal nodded with a forlorn sigh. "Don't we all? What level are you on?"

"I don't know where I stand on an Auradon Level." Mal shrugged. "But I fought pirates on the Isle. The only people I can't beat are my old friend Jay and my husband. I really want the two of them to spar each other..."

"That doesn't help much. No one could beat Ben." Lonnie rolled her eyes. "Here, come on, let's go on the grass over here." She held out a hand and Mal jumped off the stage. The group followed Mal and Lonnie over to the grass, where they both took up fighting stances. A crowd followed and gathered around, with the news trucks wheeling cameras over to watch the action and people holding their phones up to see. Mal examined Lonnie's stance and found she was remarkably well-balanced but too eager to prove herself. She smirked.

"On three!" A tall, blonde-haired boy with a scowl declared. He'd been introduced, but Mal couldn't remember his name. "One, two, three!" And he jumped back.

Lonnie swung first, and Mal caught the blade head-on and dug her toes in. She let Lonnie lock her sword, and faked that she was shaking backward, lowering towards the ground, as Lonnie tensed her entire body and pushed Mal closer to the ground. When her sword and part of her weight was on Mal's sword, Mal jumped up and picked Lonnie up off of the ground using their locked swords and Lonnie's ankle. Lonnie shrieked as she went tumbling over Mal's head and landed on her back. She sat there, heaving for a few seconds, and then got to her feet. Even though Mal had technically won the match, she took up a defensive stance to let Lonnie know she was free to try and attack the young queen.

Lonnie came forward and swung towards Mal's left, careful not to lock swords with her again. Mal blocked and ducked under Lonnie's arm as the next swing came. Lonnie spun around, and the two started to exchange blows. Lonnie was good but not as good as, say, Uma or Captain Hook. Mal took a stab towards Lonnie's legs, making her jump back, and then swung her sword straight out of her grasp. The crowd gasped as Lonnie's sword skidded through the grass and hit a tree with a thud. Lonnie gasped and hunched over with sweat pouring down her face. "You're good!" She gasped. "Ugh. Why can't you beat Ben, again?"

"He's too strong for me to use his locks against him," Mal grumbled, helping Lonnie up and shaking her hand. "You're good. And I'm glad we did this because I've been wondering lately if Ben's trying to go easier on me. Guess not."

Lonnie laughed, and Mal passed her sword back. "Where is Ben?" Lonnie asked with a laugh. "I thought he was supposed to be doing today?"

"He was," Mal announced, turning towards the crowds with a roll of her eyes. "He double-booked himself and didn't realize it until we got up today. So right now he's stuck in a meeting and I get to be here."

"Don't you have things you're supposed to be doing?" Lonnie laughed. "I thought you had your own two kingdoms."

"I do, and I'm actually heading to the Isle of the Lost some time this week so we can start mass
Mal rolled her eyes. "Really, this just got me out of my office." She shook Lonnie's hand. "Well, thank you very much for the battle. Any more questions?"

"Yeah, actually." Lonnie laughed. "Does Ben snore? He always said he didn't, but we all thought he was lying."

"He doesn't." Mal shook her head. "Or, actually, only when he falls asleep upright. So long as he's lying flat, we're fine." She snorted and began to walk towards the crowds of people who were all anxiously waiting to ask her questions. "Anyways, nice to meet you!" She waved as Lonnie laughed and retrieved her sword. She and her friends walked away. The blonde-haired boy continued scowling over his shoulder at her, and Mal got the feeling he wasn't a huge fan of Maleficent or her daughter.

"Queen Mal!" People shouted as she walked past them. "Queen Mal!"

"Hey." Mal smiled and waved. She couldn't see Stewart, her escort anywhere, but assuming he was keeping an eye on her from a distance. "What's going on, guys? How can I help you?"

"Do you have any jokes for us?" Someone asked. Mal shrugged, digging her hands into her pockets.

"It's hard to come up with jokes on the spot." She complained. "Give me a minute and I'll see if I have any."

"Queen Mal, how does it feel to be the most envied girl in Auradon?" A reporter yelled over the crowds of people.

Mal blinked and leaned closer to an unsuspecting college student. "Is he talking to me?" She whispered loudly. People chuckled, and Mal shrugged. "I didn't know I was the most envied girl in Auradon. I was quite convinced that that was my mother-in-law."

"Well, you're married to the King of Auradon." A shorter girl with black hair pointed out. "Who wouldn't want to be you?"

"Anyone who enjoys having free time," Mal responded. "I'm so busy, I barely notice I'm married to Ben anymore." Everyone laughed. Mal raised her eyebrow undauntingly into the camera. Oh boy, was Ben going to have a field day when he got out of that meeting of his.

"What can you tell us about Ben?" someone who was holding a smartphone up to film her asked. Mal shrugged. "I dunno. What do you want to know about him?"

Immediately, everyone exploded with a million questions. Mal caught things about work, about the moors, about the kingdom, and about her mother. Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Guys, calm down." She called. "Um, okay, five things about Ben, and I've got to make this as embarrassing for him as possible." She tapped her fingers on her chin. Dozens of things came to mind that would be embarrassing, but she felt like it'd be a bit low to say them on camera. For example, she could say he was turned on by the idea of magic, but boy, wouldn't that be a press field day? "Ben can't wear socks to bed because he hates the feel of the sheets through the socks. It's a very specific pet peeve." She began, and people exchanged incredulous looks and laughed. Mal held up a finger and continued thinking. "He only knows five swear words, and he used all of them almost simultaneously once when we were out driving, and a deer ran in front of the car right as a semi-truck was in the oncoming lane on a two-lane road." She put up two fingers as the crowds burst into laughter. She smirked. "I was driving," she added.
She drummed her free fingers against her thigh and hummed. "Ben… has only fallen in love once. He refuses to call a brandy a brandy and insists it's cognac and has an entire lecture memorized to back himself up. Oh! And he sheds! He and his dad, holy crap!" Mal threw her hands up beside her face. "Every single time he uses the shower, he has to clean the drain out because he loses so much freaking hair. It's a miracle any is left on his head!"

The crowd was laughing as Mal shook her head, acting irate. Someone waved a hand near her face, making her flinch back, and then called: "What does Ben think of your mom?"

Mal shrugged. She could only imagine what Ben thought of Maleficent. "We don't talk about my mom very often." She admitted. "But, if I had to guess, he probably…" She trailed off. Ben probably resented Maleficent for cursing her daughter into slavery. He probably thought she was a bad mother, and probably expected Mal to hate her.

Really, Mal should hate Maleficent, right? Maleficent had betrayed her, sold her as a sixteen-year-old to the crown without worrying about her safety, even knowing that the crown prince was older than her. But still, Maleficent was her mom, right?

Mal swallowed. "I honestly have no clue. I bet Ben probably just thinks of her as some sort of distant, crazy relative." She swallowed. "Can someone ask me a funny question now? I like funny questions." She brushed her hair behind her ear and examined everyone around her.

"Trying to be Rapunzel?" Someone asked with a chuckle, pointing to her long hair.

Mal laughed. "So long as Ben isn't stabbed or cut, that's fine." She trailed her fingers through her hair. "Why do you guys keep asking me so many questions about Ben?"

"Because he's the core ruler." Someone shrugged. "But you're interesting too. Can you tell us five unique things about yourself?"

"Gladly." Mal rolled her eyes. "Because it's obvious that I'm the important one." She tried to flip her hair and failed miserably. She sighed. "I didn't mean that statement and I'm ashamed that it ended up on public TV." She confided to the crowd. "But yeah, five interesting things about me. I have purple hair, I have purple hair, I have purple hair, and-"

"Oh, come on!" The crowd exploded, and Mal laughed. She held up five fingers and started counting down as she spoke.

"My favorite royal is Aurora. She was super nice to me when I expected her to hate my guts. I think the worst weather is wind because it's hard to hear things and it's annoying. I adore strawberries and think my father in law is scary." Mal stopped at four and tossed ideas back and forth in her head on what to say for her fifth thing.

"Favorite hobby?" Someone suggested.

Mal wrinkled her nose. "Hobbies? When you're queen? I used to be a wicked artist, but I haven't painted anything since I first came to Auradon." She shrugged. "Whenever we have spare time, we spend it with each other. Ben and I. We just talk for ages and ages and ages." She shrugged.

"Is he a good kisser?" A boy asked, leaning forward and raising his eyebrows delicately.

Mal frowned. "This is about me." She whined. "But, hey, there's my fifth thing, I'm a good kisser." She crossed her arms and dared the crowd to challenge her. Everyone burst into laughter. "And I know," She began tactfully, sniffing a little as she prepared to defend herself, "Because the one boy I've kissed in my life told me so."
The crowd began to laugh and howl. Some people laughed so hard they bent over clutching their stomachs. Mal kept her arms crossed and raised her eyebrow at the camera as the cameraman turned away from his work, laughing along with the rest of the crowd. She brushed her hair aside. She liked how Auradonians thought she was funny. On the Isle, most sarcasm was defensive, and most of her sarcasm just didn't translate in the moorlands. So it was nice for Auradon to be laughing whenever she said something.

"I could honestly talk about that all day, though." She continued as people recovered enough to listen to her. "Here's the thing I've learned though; a kiss has to happen in the proper place and time. In front of Auradon is not the right time or place. But before we leave for work? Yes. When we're out driving together, and we stop on the side of the road? Yes. Right after a stressful meeting or a generally long day? Yes. In front of his parents when they're giving us looks like: 'really'? That generates the feeling of: 'please kill me now'."

The crowds burst into laughter again, and Mal decided that was enough. She waved as she walked away with a proud smile.

Hiro was standing beside an abnormally tall blonde woman and a larger dark-skinned Man. She approached the group. The blonde woman gestured to her as she approached, and the two men turned to see her.

"Hey." She greeted, nodding at everyone. "So, this is a college, right?"

"Right." Hiro nodded. "But you're a mite bit preoccupied to be considering classes, aren't you?"

"I'm not." Mal shook her head. "I'm way too busy. But what do you have?"

Hiro raised an eyebrow. "It's easier to ask what we don't have. We have the widest course selection in all of Auradon, and it gets bigger every five years or so. We're taking on nine new classes next year."

"Wow." Mal raised her eyebrows. "How many do you have now?"


"That's incredible." Mal commended them, looking around and feeling impressed. "So you'll pass four hundred in, what, less than ten years?"

"Maybe by the end of next year." Hiro nodded, waving to a group of college students as they walked past. "And we only had one-hundred when I first became Dean. Within five years of me taking over, we had two-hundred and were buying up all the land around here. You're not going to come here, right?"

"No." Mal declined. "I just don't have that time."

Hiro shrugged. "Well, let's see. You're seventeen now. Give it twenty or so years, and by the time your children are born and grown up, we'll be well on our way to five-hundred."

Mal's mouth ran a bit dry. She shrugged off-handedly. "How do you have enough space?" She asked.

"An excellent construction and technology course." Hiro shrugged. "We still have about forty acres of unused land to the west, and they build us new buildings."

"Fascinating." Mal nodded. "What are your most popular classes?"
"Science and technology." Hiro decided immediately. "That's what we're renowned for. And after that, probably dance, songwriting, animations, fashion design, and art." He sighed and leaned back. "And we also have things like animal care and mathematics and crafts. And the sports section is really, really big as well."

"That's incredible," Mal repeated. She hesitated and gestured around. "Would it be a terrible problem if I looked around?"

"Of course not." Hiro shook his head. "We have classes going, so I wouldn't wander in and cause a commotion, but you can feel free to look around."

Mal nodded in approval and then outstretched her hand to shake Hiro's. "Thanks for having me here." She smiled.

Hiro's grin spread wide. "Anytime." He replied, and then he and his friends returned to their conversation. Hiro, Honey-Lemon, and Wasabi. Mal turned away and started to walk around.

The campus had dozens of large buildings and many large grassy areas in-between. College students were lounging around, chatting excitedly, many of them in cosplay. It made her smile. She spotted some large buildings in the far distance and decided to make her way over there.

"Queen Maleficent." Someone huffed as they caught up with her. Mal flinched and turned around cautiously. The same blonde-haired boy from before was catching up to her. He kept his hands in his pockets as he glowered down at her a little. Mal frowned and stiffened her shoulders.

"Mal, actually. Just Mal. Remind me of your name?" She crossed her arms and chewed on her lip.

"Chad." The boy introduced himself. "Charming. Another one of Ben's old friends." His eyes roamed her figure as he pinched his lips together.

Mal raised her eyebrows in defense. "I think I saw you in his old photos." She nodded. "Did you, ahem, need me?"

Chad's eyes jumped up from where they'd landed on her hips and snapped onto her eyes like they were lasers he was directing into her head. "How did Ben's parents find you?" He asked.

Mal bit her cheek. "The guards found me on the Isle. Why?"

"Why were they on the Isle?" Chad demanded, taking a step forward and looking down his nose at her. Mal straightened up and glared right back at him.

"National security matters. I happened to cross paths with them. They brought me back, I met Ben, and the rest is history." Mal scoffed. "Why? Do you have a problem with me?"

"Yeah." Chad sneered. "I do. How'd you get him to like you? A love spell?"

"What?" Mal gasped, backing up a little. "Of course not. I didn't even know any spells." She took a step away from him. People were glancing over, but quickly averting their eyes. Mal's mouth felt dry. "Look, I don't know what your problem is with me, but I have done nothing to antagonize you and I don't know what you're trying to insinuate."

"I didn't take Ben to pick girls based on looks alone." Chad scowled.

"He's not," Mal mumbled, frowning. On the far contrary, really. Chad held his hands up at her words in sarcastic defense.
"No, really, I get it, you're gorgeous. Who wouldn't want to slam you? Your body is…” he trailed off, drinking in her figure. "Bewitching. I'd go down on you hard too. Ben had serious standards though. What did you do to make him dump Audrey and agree to marry you just like that?" Chad snapped by her face, and Mal leaned back with her mouth falling open. She sputtered, and no sound came out.

Chad crossed his arms and examined her stance, her body. Mal swallowed and backed up. "No, no, it's not like that." She took a deep breath. "Ben and I – our relationship–"

"God, I don't need to hear about your bed life. It's pretty obvious. You're the kind of pretty people break beds with." Chad interrupted with his face twisting. "You're flawless and hot, not to mention you're a midget. I'm sure he has all sorts of fun on you. But that shouldn't have been enough to convince him to make Maleficent's daughter queen." Chad folded his arms and his gaze started raking up her hips. "Did you blackmail him? Or did your mother do something from the Isle?" Mal flinched back in shock, and then straightened up.

"I beg your pardon but I have done and will do nothing of the sort." She snapped. "What's your issue anyway? Isn't Auradon supposed to be the place of upstanding citizens and heroes?"

"You'd think so, but we apparently have Isle Hookers slipping up through the ranks," Chad argued.

"Just you watch." Mal grit her teeth. "One day, the Isle will be the better place to be. At least there, people don't sneak around to bully other people's spouses." The moment it slipped out of her mouth, Mal flinched. If the Isle had spouses, she reminded herself. If the Isle had spouses.

"Are you talking about Audrey?" Chad asked with a furrowed brow. "Oh, my dear queen, you're severely mistaken. Audrey and Ben were Auradon's dream couple. It was true love. You're the one sneaking around with Ben and bullying Audrey."

"Ben was going to dump Audrey!" Mal exploded. "Long before I ever came into the picture he was frustrated with the way she tried to walk all over everyone."

"Makes sense why he'd go for the power-hungry witch next." Chad hissed.

Mal stuck a finger up into the air and tried to calm her magic behind her eyes. "You have my character severely wrong. I have not manipulated anyone. I haven't used a single spell or charm or anything on anyone. Ben chose me. And I chose Ben. Our 'bed life' had absolutely nothing to do with our decision. Why? Because decent people don't make decisions that hurt others like that. We were thinking of your homeland, Chad."

Chad scoffed loudly and leaned down into her face with smoldering eyes. His cologne was strong and overpowering. Mal wanted to cough. "You honestly expect me to believe," he began with a harsh laugh from the back of his throat, "that Ben, the golden boy of Auradon, who was raised from day one to be King of Auradon, who was dating the most beautiful girl in Auradon and had everything he wanted, slandered his public reputation, threw away everything, and became the youngest of all his friends to settle down all because he chose you? The daughter of Maleficent?"

Mal pushed Chad back firmly with her fingertips. "If you actually know Ben, the harder conclusion to believe is that he did all that so he could, as you say, slam me a couple of times." Her heart twisted in her chest at the violent descriptions and she wanted to be sick as anger pricked at her eyes. "I thought you said you were friends. How many times did he ever manipulate someone like that when you knew him?"

"Things have been different since you showed up." Chad glared at her. "I don't know what you're
doing to him, but he leaves the palace less and less. He took Aurora's kingdom away from her to give it to Mal, gave you control of all our villains and he grows more distant every day. He used to talk about how much he loved Auradon. Now he only talks about how he's going to fix Auradon."

"He is going to fix Auradon!" Fierce tears stabbed her eyes but she forced them away with a steady hand. "He's going to be the greatest King Auradon will ever have and he - he'll prove you wrong!"

"Are you going to make him?" Chad asked, pushing her back a few steps and advancing on her. "You are, aren't you? How are you manipulating him? Is it something your mother gave you? Is it something you came up with?"

"I'm not spelling him." Mal hissed, digging in her heels and bracing her arms into a fighting stance. "I would never-"

"And his parents too! Did you spell them? How did you convince them?" Chad continued, balling his fists up. "You're a tart. A call girl. And there is definitely something fishy going on here. You're lying when you say there isn't. Well, you know what, you can fool all of Auradon with your 'divine rights speech. You can fool Belle and Adam with whatever bull crap you and your mother invented. You can even distract Ben with whatever his favorite flavors are, but you and your magical looks and clever tongue can't fool me, Maleficent."

A long pause stretched out as the two glared each other down. Oh, she wanted to punch him. She wanted to scream and light him on fire and slam his stupid face into the ground just so she could watch him burn and bleed at the same time. Mutilate the parts of him that he'd insinuated Ben was hurting her with, and string him up just to show Auradon what she thought of the tart-like heirs apparently everyone except Ben had turned out to be.

And like the angels of the good lord himself, she imagined Ben crossing his arms and looking across the room at her. If she killed Chad, it'd reflect badly on Ben. So really, there was only one thing to do. She exhaled and closed her eyes to gather her thoughts.

"I'm not going to hear anything else from you." She demanded. "No more. Not a word. People don't deserve to be treated the way you treat me. Ben's parents arranged most of it, and proceedings that have not been released are under ties of national security. I'm not permitted to discuss it with anyone. If you have a problem with me being in the palace then... I'm sorry?" She took a few more steps back. "And for the record, this conversation is... inappropriate and misinformed. I bet you know Ben wouldn't approve of the things you just said to me."

"Are you going to tell him?" Chad asked, stepping forward and into her personal bubble with narrowing eyes. He reached a finger up and pointed at her. His nail was dangerously near her cheek. "I could hurt you."

Mal snatched his arm in her clenched fist and squeezed. Chad gasped in pain and his tense muscles faltered. She lit her eyes and leaned forward. "Not without my permission, you can't." She released his arm with a fierce look. Chad took several steps back, looking shocked. Mal made a motion for him to turn around and walk away. Then she herself turned to walk out towards the campus.

A hand materialized on her rear and squeezed hard, painfully. Mal gasped and spun around, forming a fist and sending it flying straight into Chad's face. He'd stepped up behind her and seized her with fire in his eyes that was doused with his own dirty blood as the sound of his nose breaking carried over to the camera crews. He released her, hitting his knees with a shout.

"How dare you!" Mal shouted, seizing his arms and lifting him clear off of the ground like he was a book or something. Her muscles were showing through her shirt as she hurled him point-blank
away from her. He soared through the air, tumbled on the pathway, and then looked up in shock. His face was covered in scrapes and cuts.

Stewart appeared, weaving through the crowd and unclipping his gun from his hip. "What happened?" He gasped, rushing over as people began to help Chad up. He took Mal's arm, and she tossed off his grip.

"He grabbed me." Mal frowned, letting her piercing stare land on Chad. She could feel her magic threatening to surface in her eyes. "He grabbed my butt when I was walking away from him."

Stewart took her arm carefully. "Let's go." He whispered. "Now."

Mal frowned at Stewart. "You're taking me back to the palace over this? It's his fault!" She threw her arm out towards Chad and her eyes flashed. Her hair felt full of static as it cackled and waved around her shoulders. People screamed and a wide berth formed around her before Mal took a deep breath and her magic stabilized. "You're right." She growled. "Take me back to the palace, now."

Stewart nodded with a sigh and put a hand on her arm to lead her away from the scene.

The door to their bedroom opened and Mal looked up as Ben dropped his briefcase beside the door. His face was absolutely expressionless as he stared over at her. Mal was sitting cross-legged on top of the covers, which had been straightened out since that morning, and sketching on a blank sheet of artist paper. They locked gazes for a few seconds and then Mal turned her gaze away.

Ben slipped his shoes off and set them inside his closet before he walked over and sat down on his side of the bed. The mattress shifted dramatically towards him as Mal kept her focus. He glanced over her shoulder and found an immaculate, detailed sketch of her mother's spellbook with a grotesque lock in the shape of a skull behind it. He hummed. "Wow. I guess it was a really awful day, huh?"

Mal shrugged. "It didn't start off too bad." She mumbled. Ben reached over and pulled the loose pages out from under her grasp. Mal stilled her hands as he flipped through the pages one by one. One was of the Isle's new buildings from a bird's eye view, with little trees stretching across the way. Another was of the palace crest alongside something that equally resembled a crest though it was unlike any Ben had ever seen, with stone and locks. He guessed Mal was drafting things for the Isle. The final was a quick sketch of three older teens, two boys, and a girl. At the bottom of the page were their names, penciled in. Ben let a flash of a smile slip across his face. He had, not only names, but faces now. He cleared his expression and put them down on the bed, folding his hands in his lap. Mal twisted the edges of her paper in her fingers, and Ben waited for her to say something.

When the silence had reigned long enough, Ben reached over and brushed her long hair back and over the shoulder farthest from him, leaving her neck exposed. He leaned over and pressed a kiss on her jaw, and then a tiny one on her neck. It was the very first time he'd tried doing that, and she seemed to immediately relax as he did. He gauged her reaction carefully and then pressed his mouth back over her pale skin. His tongue skimmed her skin. He rested his hand on her back, and Mal didn't move as he kept his lips against her neck. All she could hear were Chad's words reverberating in her head. Mal sighed. "What did you hear?" She asked Ben.

"I heard you gave a beautiful speech and decimated two of my friends in two very different ways." Ben hummed. Her skin tingled.

"And I'm guessing you want to know why Stewart put me in time-out?" Mal asked sarcastically, picking at a string in her jeans.
"Stewart left you at the gate. You came up here yourself." Ben pointed out, not refuting her question.

Mal shrugged and ripped a tiny tear into the side of the paper. Ben took it out of her hands so she wouldn't ruin it and examined the intricate details. Ben sighed and hooked a hand around his knee as he faced her. "I saw your speech, actually. You did really, really well."

"I still have yours." Mal sighed. "Yours was awful by the way."

Ben chuckled. "I can only imagine." He sighed.

Mal snorted and nodded. "It was." She smiled and twiddled her thumbs together. "Am I in trouble?"

"Well, yeah." Ben nodded, looking at her with a raised eyebrow. Mal flinched and looked up at him with a cautious eye. He put an arm around her. "I'm disappointed in you. You should have thrown Chad farther."

Mal snorted, relaxing into his side and wiping her hands on her knees. She swallowed. "I'm sorry about the magic."

"It's fine. The cameras caught his hand slipping off of you, so everyone knew what happened." Ben sighed. He rubbed a little circle on her shoulder. "I'm… really sorry. I knew he and Audrey were a bit worried when we first married but I didn't think he'd assault you like that."

"I don't think anyone heard what he said." Mal blurted out, looking at her hands.

"What he said?" Ben asked, sitting up and looking at her. He set a hand on her chin and dragged his thumb down her jawline. Mal blinked softly, refusing to meet his eyes.

"He said I had a nice bo- that I looked nice." Mal swallowed. She let out a little exhale and her eyes flicked to the ceiling. "Said he understood why you'd agreed to the whole thing. That he could only imagine the fun you have on me. Who wouldn't want to slam me? I'm the kind of pretty people break beds with. And he also said… I'm small and I'm pretty… he'd be happy to go down on me too."

"Chad?" Ben withdrew from around her, looking horrified. "He… he wouldn't… Chad really did that?"

Mal didn't meet his eyes. She didn't know if he believed her as she carefully began to pop her knuckles. Out of habit, she tried searching the locks framing her face for some hair she could chew on, but there weren't any short enough. She hadn't indulged in her habit for so long that all traces of it were gone.

Ben looked away. She traced the slope of his shoulders with his eyes, watching them rise and fall with every heavy breath. He swallowed audibly. "So, he said, his specific words, were 'I can only imagine the fun he has on you. You're small and pretty, and I'd be happy to go down on you too?'"

"He said 'I didn't take Ben to pick girls based on looks alone. I get it, you're gorgeous and your body is bewitching. I'd go down on you hard too. You're flawless and hot, not to mention you're a midget; I'm sure he has all sorts of fun with you.'" Mal sighed. "And I told him you'd be mad, and he started to say: 'I could hurt you', and then I scared him a little before… everything else."

Ben sniffed and nodded. He turned back towards her and put his hand on her knee to squeeze it comfortably. "I'll take care of it." He whispered. "I'm sorry that it happened. Thank you for
covering me, but if people are going to think that's okay when I'm not around, I'm definitely not
going to ask you to do it again."

Mal shrugged and nodded. Ben scooted closer to the center of the bed and hugged her. Mal leaned
her head on his shoulder for a few short seconds, and then Ben withdrew and poked her. "You're in
trouble for real though." He informed her with a stern frown.

Mal's mouth twisted downwards. "For what?" She asked.

Ben turned around and knelt on the edge of the bed, leaning over to look her in the eyes. "I
do not shed." He informed her sternly.

Mal processed what he'd said, and then began to laugh. "I'm serious!" Ben frowned. He set a hand
on her shoulder as Mal leaned her head back, uncurled her legs, and began to laugh. "And what you
said about my swearing and the socks and – and the cognac! – That was a low blow."

"It's so true!" Mal laughed. "Oh, the socks! You hate them! You always give me weird looks when
I wear them!"

"Why would you wear socks to bed?" Ben shook his hands irately. "They itch against the covers!"

Mal leaned back into the pillows and Ben laid down on his stomach, trying to hold back laughs as
he pinched his lips at her. Mal's stomach was honestly starting to hurt as she kept laughing. "I don't
suppose it matters much." He sighed as she started to calm down. "Apparently you don't even
notice you've married anymore, so…"

Mal began to laugh even harder. "And all my free time is spent with you!" She laughed. "It's so, so
ture. Even now!"

"Well, you did draw a bit today." Ben shrugged, looking over at her pages. "And they're amazing,
by the way." He sat up a little to pick up the one of her friends again with a mischievous smile.

Mal hummed and calmed down, looking up at the ceiling with a content smile on her face. Ben
watched her face relax serenely, and his heart sped up a few beats. He leaned down on his elbows
above her and watched her gaze move from the ceiling to him. She smiled a little up at him.

Ben put his hand on her face and leaned down. He could feel her breath on his mouth before a
hand appeared in his path. Mal was frowning, looking uncomfortable. "I… I don't want to kiss
now, Ben." She told him. "I'm sorry, I don't. It's still too… fresh."

"The memories?" He asked, withdrawing. Mal nodded and looked away. Ben nodded and sat back
up. "Alright." He agreed. "I'm sorry. Thank you for telling me."

Mal blinked and glanced back at him, and a tiny warm smile bloomed across her little rosy lips.
Ben patted her leg and looked towards the window. "About Chad, I'm going to reach out to his
kingdom, and have him put on parole for inappropriate behavior towards the queen. And I'm going
to apply for a temporary restraining order, alright?"

"Alright," Mal mumbled, though she knew it wouldn't do much to fix Chad's feelings.

"He wasn't all wrong, you know." Ben hummed, turning back towards you. Mal frowned up at him,
and several shades of hurt faded across her face. Ben reached over and took her hand. "You're
gorgeous, bewitching, flawless and hot." He smiled with the right side of his mouth crooking up
higher than the left. "But I don't pick girls based on looks alone." He squeezed her palm tightly
with both hands and brought her fingers up to his mouth to kiss them, one by one. "You are far
more beautiful than looks alone would tell."

Mal's mouth crooked up at the side. She sat up and Ben opened his arms. Mal slipped into his arms and they wrapped their arms around each other. Ben leaned his head on her shoulder as Mal closed her eyes. Suddenly, everything Chad had said seemed very, very far away.

Mal stood in front of the bathroom mirror. She couldn't deny that she was incredibly nervous. It wasn't like she was used to meeting royals; she'd done it exactly once in her lifetime. Given that that one time had featured Stewart and another guard holding her like a prisoner while she was dirty from head to toe with a severe case of haven't-brushed-my-hair-in-three-days, it wasn't like she could do much worse.

Now, she was stronger. You couldn't tell her hair was as long as it was because Sophia had braided it back today. She needed to chop it off before she went back to the moors or she'd end up looking like Rapunzel of Corona. Her skin was whiter, and her freckles were fading away to form a perfect, smooth complexion. Mal blamed being in direct contact with the Moor soil, which, like everything else in the moors, had excellent healing powers.

Something that had probably started before Mal went to the Moors but that she only noticed now was that she was much toner and stronger than she'd been on the Isle. It was probably the result of a proper diet and the natural use of her magic. She examined the flow of her muscles under her sleeves, knowing Ben had already been admiring them whenever he saw them. She'd also caught Ben watching the video of her decking Chad and pausing it as she raised him above her head.

Sophia tapped on the open bathroom door, disrupting Mal from her musings. She smiled. "You look great." She told Mal. "Don't worry."

Mal shrugged. She examined herself in the mirror a little more. "Is it terribly cold out?" She asked Sophia as she picked at the dress she had on. It had very wide sleeves and a high neckline. It went down to her knees and was white with purple accents.

"Not at all." Sophia smiled. "I was just out. Her Highness Queen Elsa will be coming down the driveway in a few minutes, and the press has already gathered."

"Hmm." Mal hummed as she thought aloud. "If I stay up here and stall just right, they won't be able to ask any questions before Elsa gets here." She winked at Sophia, who rolled her eyes and then began to follow her friend downstairs.

Mal could hear the chatter of the press outside from the moment she stepped into the entry hall. She let out a deep exhale and then hurried down the stairs. Her purple flats made it easy to run. She opened the door herself and let Sophia slip through before she pulled it closed. Cameras began to flash as she stepped into the sunlight. She waved and hurried through the crowd. People called her name, but she did not answer. She made her way to where Ben was standing and hovered anxiously beside him until he noticed her and extended his hand. She took it with a soft smile as reporters went crazy behind them.

Ben had been busy addressing a group of reporters in front of him, but once Mal showed up, it was clear who the real prize was.

"Queen Mal!" One hyperactive girl called. "How's construction on the Isle going?"

"Lovely." Mal's eyes sparkled as she spoke. "They've completed the outside walls of the safe city, along with the smaller buildings. I hope soon I'll be able to start helping people move to a better
"How will you help refugees in your own kingdom?" She asked while she scribbled down everything that had just been said.

Mal glanced at Ben. "I'm going to go myself, of course. Ben and I have also talked about opening the mission to Auradon people who would like to make a difference in a broken community. We're going to hammer out a few last details before I speak to the press personally in a few weeks to explain the ideas and thoughts we've been passing around as we've been at work."

Ben smiled and squeezed her hand a little.

"Queen Mal!" A young man shouted. "We notice your hair is much longer than it was before. Have you or have you not performed magic to increase its length?"

Mal tensed up just a little. She hadn't seen the backlash to her eyes going crazy on national TV yet, but she assumed it was there. She smiled shyly. "It is really long, isn't it?" She asked as she ran her fingers down her braid. "No, I haven't performed magic on it. It's just an effect of being in the moors. The fairies like to play with my hair, and their magic makes it super long." She chuckled. "I'm going to have to cut it before I return, otherwise it'll get in the way when I walk."

"What magic have you been performing lately?" The first reporter asked eagerly.

Mal shrugged. "Not much, guys. I mean, I did just get back from the moors and I perform lots of magic there, but other than that, not a lot in Auradon."

"Will the moors and the Isle of the Lost join together as one nation under your rule?" Another question was asked. The reporters, both around and in front of them, were scribbling away so fast Mal almost expected some of their pencils to smoke.

"Probably not." Mal laughed. "One is surrounded by water, and they're sort of on different sides of Auradon. Also, the creatures are different. I intend to keep them separate." She beckoned the reporters closer. "I'll tell you a secret though..." She whispered comically. The reporters inched toward her, which was funny since Mal was a great deal shorter than them. "I brought back several types of magical plants with me, which have already been sent to the Isle, and some moor people will be joining me temporarily on the Isle of the Lost to help clean things up there."

The reporters began to buzz excitedly. Mal held up a finger. "But-" She interjected. "We're currently having problems bringing them into Auradon because many of the creatures would violate Auradon's magical prohibition laws. Ben and I are looking into fair ways to open the Moors to Auradon, and also looking at the old laws to see ways we can create loopholes. We're currently taking suggestions on ways we can improve the law systems, especially the magic ones."

"Specifically, in Mal's case." Ben elbowed her. "Considering she's creating an entire nation from scratch."

The reporters opened their mouths again, but both Ben and Mal held up a hand synchronously, then chuckled at themselves. "That's enough questions for now," Ben said. "Please, clear the way. Queen Elsa is coming."

Down the driveway, a white carriage was approaching. Mal expected it to be made of ice, but it appeared to be iron-wrought. The reporters cleared and took photos of the approaching carriage as it pulled to the head of the driveway and stopped. Ben leaned down and whispered in Mal's ear: "take a deep breath," before he left Mal's side to open the door of the carriage. Once it was open, he..."
held out a hand and smiled brightly as a pale figure took it and stood inside the carriage.

Queen Elsa was six foot two, only two inches shy of Ben, and wore a silver dress made of ice. Recent leg issues required her to carry a cane which she wielded more like a staff than anything else. The blonde was fifty, and her hair had gotten even whiter as she aged. Piercing blue eyes with light grey eyeliner took in everything around her as she descended to the ground. Mal stiffened her spine.

Queen Elsa smiled and shook Ben's hand. As she released him, Ben turned to help four others out of the queen's carriage. Princess Anna had accompanied her sister along with Anna's ten-year-old daughter Kaitlyn and Ericka, Elsa's daughter. Lastly, Ben helped a child of no more than five out.

Elsa turned towards Mal, and Mal felt the ice magic that the queen put out around her. She'd become more sensitive to magic after being in the moors for such extended periods of time and could often tell if a person was magical simply by looking at them. Elsa looked absolutely amazed by Mal as she began to walk toward the young queen. Mal caught flashes of Elsa's legs through the famous slit as the older queen reached out a hand. Mal bent forward to take it as cameras everywhere went off. She and Elsa held onto each other's hands for a few minutes before Elsa let out a breath. "A true magical queen." She said proudly.

Mal smiled and nodded as red tones set into her cheeks. "Of course." She began to laugh. "It is so, so nice to finally meet you."

"Same to you." Elsa relaxed. She turned and gestured to the group behind her. "This is my daughter, Ericka, and my sister, Anna. You may know her from our fairy tale."

Mal smiled. "You'll have to forgive me for not knowing your stories, actually. I've been trying to catch up on everyone, but it's hard when you're so busy. I haven't even watched Sleeping Beauty's fairy tale, and I really need to do that before I embarrass myself." She looked at Ben for help.

"Did you know Hans on the Isle?" He asked, setting a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes," Mal said slowly. She'd known a number of Han's children as well. They were charmers, all of them. "Hans mostly keeps to himself, though." She remembered.

Anna gave her a nervous wave. She was wearing a dress with a blue top and purple skirt. "Um, Hans tried to marry me, and then I accidentally sent Elsa into the mountains when I revealed her magic to the kingdom, and then I left Hans in charge of the kingdom when I tried to go save Elsa, and he got the people to trust him, and Elsa froze my heart so we went back to Arendelle and he left me to freeze solid and claimed the monarchy! Elsa got brought back to Auradon and then Hans was about to kill her when I jumped in front of her and his sword broke in between my fingers and I actually have a scar, but everything worked out in the end!" She chuckled uneasily and trailed off, rubbing the area between her index and middle fingers carefully.

Mal blinked, trying to process everything at once. "Okay," She said slowly. "That... totally works. Well, I'm Mal," She gave a quick curtsey. "And... I don't really have a fairy tale yet, but I'm in the middle of one." Ben chuckled behind her as she righted herself with a smirk.

Elsa smiled while Anna came up the stairs to hang excitedly off of her sister's shoulder. "Your hair is fabulous!" She exclaimed. "And so long!"

Mal chuckled. "For real." She said. "I need to chop it. Every time the fairies at the moors play in it, it gets longer."
Anna's daughter Kaitlyn blinked. "Fairies?" She asked excitedly. Kaitlyn wore her blonde hair in two pigtails with lots of wavy curls hanging off her shoulders. She smiled a lot like her mom.

"Yeah," Mal said with a bright smile. Ericka took the youngest child's hands and began leading her up the steps behind Kaitlyn and Anna. "So, you're Ericka?" Mal asked. Ericka was shorter than Elsa, but taller than Mal still. She wore a blue summer dress and had her hair braided over her shoulder, just like her mom's. She wore knee-high lace-up shoes. "Ben's told me a bit about you."

Ericka nodded. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief. "This is my sister, Jessie." Upon the introduction, Mal immediately bent down and held out a hand to Jessie.

"Hello, Jessie!" She waved. Jessie's white, flyaway hair had little frost pieces in it. It made Mal smile.

"Hi!" Jessie chirped, like a little bird.

"Want to come up here and hold my hand?" Mal invited, holding out her hand and fluttering her fingers.

Jessie nodded and slipped up in between Elsa and Mal, where she took both of their hands. Mal grinned excitedly. Jessie was tinier than the average four-year old, with short white hair that poofed out from her ears. Her eyes were bright blue, the same as her mom's. She was a magical person herself, that Mal knew off of instinct. But something was... different. She had magic like her mom, but with variations.

This told Mal something important that she was sure no one else would be able to tell; Jessie's father had powers similar to Elsa that were coded differently, for lack of a better word. In fact, she could even sense a pattern of differences between Elsa and Jessie, and then Ericka, who was almost completely unlike her mom.

Mal examined the differences between Ericka and her mom. Physically, Ericka was deeper toned. Mal noticed that she was much less willowy and that she was more sturdy-built than her mother was - like she was built of snow. Emotionally, Ericka was obviously less similar to her mother. She was mischievous and playful. Mal had only just seen her climb out of the carriage and knew that this girl was sneaky, the kind to pull pranks and laugh. It was probably part of why they had chosen to not coronate her yet, despite her being Ben's age. She wasn't ready to be responsible for a kingdom. Still, she was caring and loved her people, just like her mom.

The thing that struck Mal the most was how Ericka's powers were so different from Elsa's. They were not an extension of herself, an ability, but fragmented into her person. And whereas Elsa's magical tendencies could be described as weaving into her frame, Ericka's seemed to have the same presence of a large collection of cinderblocks. "I am here." It screamed. Ericka simply wouldn't exist without her magic.

Ben struck up a conversation with Elsa about how the journey was as Mal bent down to be closer to little Jessie. "Did you like the long drive?" She asked.

Jessie looked up with big blue eyes and said, quite firmly, "No!"

Mal laughed. Ben pressed a hand to her back. "We should move inside now." He turned his attention to the press surrounding them. "Thank you all for coming!"

Jessie let go of Elsa's hand as her mom moved ahead with Ben and Kaitlyn trailing behind. Mal watched how Ericka observed the grounds with a playful eye, taking in the entire landscape despite
how the people covered most of it. Ben wouldn't notice. Maybe even Elsa and Princess Anna would miss it. But Mal had been raised on villainy, and she knew a scheme in the making when she saw it.

Little Jessie yawned as Mal helped her up the steps of the palace, so Mal bent down and offered her a lift. The little girl curled her arms around Mal's neck and buried her face in Mal's shoulder. Mal kept an arm under the little girl's legs to support her as she lifted her up. Ben, who was holding the door open for everyone, smiled at her as he saw her bring up the tail-end of the group. Little did he know she was making sure Ericka didn't disappear. She and Ben fist-bumped as they disappeared inside, and he pressed a gentle hand to her back to help her over the threshold of the palace.

Elsa smiled as she examined the entrance hall. "I remember this place quite well." She smiled. "You've replaced the flooring since I've been here, though."

Ben raised an eyebrow at the flooring, which was obviously a few years old. "When was the last time you visited outside of Arendelle?" Ben asked curiously.

Elsa laughed. "I haven't left since Ericka was born. I decided my place was far north."

A sudden thought struck Mal. "How far is the coast from you, exactly?"

Elsa smiled. "Very far. We're near the center of the continent. See, behind the mountain, where we're sandwiched in between the northern Wei and what was formerly the territory for the Huns before they were moved to the Isle, we're at the base of those mountains. What you call the Scandinavian mountains, we call the North Mountain, even though it's south of our Kingdom. Symbolism and such, we're ahead of the north. Anyway, that's where I ran to when fleeing my kingdom."

Mal chewed on her lip. "Huh. Okay." She glanced at Ben, who was looking at her with a critical eye. "Well, let's get you in your rooms."

"I'd like to keep Jessie near me, please," Elsa said.

"Of course." Mal nodded. "Ben, how about I handle Elsa and her kids, and you can help Anna and Kaitlyn?"

"Sounds good." Ben nodded as he began to head to the stairs.

Mal led Elsa, Ericka, and Jessie up the stairs behind them. "So, Ericka," She began. "What do you like to do in your spare time?"

Elsa let out a short, annoyed breath. Ericka smiled. "Pranks." She said. "I'm really good at them too."

"What kind of pranks?" Mal asked. Jessie sighed into her shoulder, and Mal smiled.

"All sorts!" Ericka said. She looked at Mal. "Aren't you a little young to be queen?"

Mal nodded. "Special case. Hey, there was this one prank me and my friends did once – we used nets and hair dye. See, my friend Jay was really good at knots and my friend Carlos was really good at mechanical things and how to make stuff work, so we strung these cables on the Jolly Roger ship so that if someone touched them, it would string them up by their hands and someone would have to cut them down. We used the hair dye to make it super bright and noticeable so that the first unlucky pirate to walk by would think it was dirty and try to brush it off. It worked great."
Ericka laughed. Mal finally stopped at a door not far from the library. "Anna and Kaitlyn should be on the other side of the library. Go down to the corner and turn right. Ericka, you'll be here, and Elsa, you'll be here. Do you want Jessie in the room with you? We do have another room prepared next door if you'd prefer that."

"Either way," Elsa said, reaching over and gently taking Jessie back, who was beginning to doze off. "Sorry, she was up late." Elsa chuckled. "I think I'll put her in my room for now, and then I would absolutely love to talk with you. Do you have time?"

"Yeah, of course!" Mal smiled. "If you're interested in hearing about the Isle or the Moors at all, since Ben told me you might be, I'd even be happy to take you to my office, so you can see everything we're hoping to put into action."

Elsa's eyes sparkled. "Well, I wouldn't want you to feel like you're talking about work the entire time, but that does sound lovely!"

"Great!" Mal smiled. Elsa opened the door and put Jessie down before she ventured back outside. The two women ventured upstairs with bright smiles, deep in conversation. Behind them, Mal heard Ericka open her door softly, close it as if she'd walked inside, and then walk softly off in the other direction.

"Yeah, you got it, the whole thing!" Anna laughed as Ben pulled out her chair for her in the dining room. Mal pulled out her own chair beside him, and King Adam pulled out Elsa's chair for her. He looked very unsure of himself as he helped her into her chair before guiding Belle to sit beside him. Kaitlyn and Jessie were sitting out on the balcony, watching the sunset over the hills and eating their dinner.

They were having barbecue chicken and watermelon, which felt like a very outside sort of meal. Mal was tempted to join the girls outside until Ben sat beside her, kissed her cheek, and put his hand on top of hers. Her heart rate picked up as she smiled at him.

"It looks like Ericka is running late." Elsa sighed. "I'm sorry. She doesn't do well with... plans."

"Spontaneous girl." Mal nodded. She glanced at her phone. "Forgive me, Elsa, but I'm afraid I'm about to teach your daughter a lesson."

Elsa frowned immediately. "I beg your pardon?" She asked.

Mal pointed to the doorway. Everyone - Belle, Ben, Adam, and Elsa - turned around to see what she was pointing at. The door slid open a few inches and Ericka appeared. Her brow was furrowed. "Sorry that I'm-" She began, and then a grinding sound came from above her head. Everyone looked up as a pail of something silvery toppled from on high.

There was a splash, and Ericka was left standing in shock, gaping as glitter-infused silver paint dripped off of her frame. "What?" She gasped for breath. "How did that get here?"

"Well, Ericka," Mal began calmly, reaching for a slice of watermelon and not batting an eye at the glitter-covered girl. "If you leave a pail of paint in my hallway, you'd better believe I will find a way to sabotage you with it." She smirked a little as Ericka's hands dropped to her sides in shock. "And tripwires? You'll have to do a bit better than that to catch an Isle girl off guard."

Ben sank into his chair. "Mal," He sighed. "Please, please don't start a war."

"Why would I start a war?" Mal asked innocently. "Now, imagine if you'd found the paint the hard
“You'd start a war over me?” Ben rolled his eyes. "No. No."

Ericka wiped her face off, still looking absolutely shocked. "How... how did you find it?" She gasped.

Mal smiled. "Find what?" She asked.

"I-I... the paint." Ericka trailed off, picking at her braid.

Mal pointed her fork at Ericka. "Don't try me, darling." She laughed.

Ericka's face twisted. She pinched her lips together and examined Mal, and then let out a brief nod as if she was accepting Mal as an equal partner. "I, um, will be back." She sighed, wiping the paint off her shoulders. "I can't be too mad about this, I guess, but I'm not going to give up!" She pointed at Mal accusingly, who rolled her eyes.

Ericka pushed the door closed and Mal stood up to examine the paint mess on the floor. "Forgive this poor abused space and clean up this entire space." She snapped her fingers at the mess. Green overtook the paint, and the silver vanished from sight. Not even any glitter was left.

Ben squeezed Mal's hand with a tense expression. Mal looked across the table to Elsa, who looked properly stunned. Slowly, everyone's gazes fell on the Snow Queen. Ben, Belle, Adam, and Anna all turned to see how the elder woman would react. Queen Elsa swallowed and brushed her hands on her napkin in her lap. "You're powerful." Elsa sighed. "And, on Ericka, thank you for what you did." She bit her cheek and shook her head. "The pranks... she can't use her magic, and fun and magic are the most important things in this world to her. But she can't ever get magic right, so I never know how to stop the pranks."

"Her magic isn't working correctly." Mal shook her head. "Very different from yours. Is it some sort of mutation?"

"I refuse to comment on that subject, and you know it, Queen Mal," Elsa replied wearily. Mal nodded and glanced towards Ben with a nod. It had been worth a shot.

Twenty minutes later, after showering, a sheepish yet determined Ericka joined them at the table. Mal didn't say anything as she watched the girl's clever eyes take in everything around her. She'd already moved Ericka's next five pranks.

Mal shifted her weight from foot to foot as the boat rocked back and forth across the sea. It was windy today, which was good for once. The sun was shining, and the ocean was a beautiful, strong blue. It was the perfect day to make some wrong things right.

"Here comes the barrier!" One of the men on the boat shouted. Mal and Fairy Godmother exchanged weary glances and Mal took hold of a rope that was strung up to the lookout post. The Fairy Godmother, unfortunately, was too sick to do much.

Mal watched the golden barrier approach. Her fingertips shook. Only about thirty meters behind the barrier was the beach. She curled her fingers tightly around the rope as the barrier crossed the front of the ship. It sped up the length of the deck. Mal took a deep breath of the open sea air before she felt the connection with her magic severed as the green barrier once again enclosed her. She exhaled and immediately began to cough as she inhaled a mouthful of smoke, ash, and grime. Whatever was over the ocean, it smelled like motor oil.
"Land Ho!" The sailor announced as Mal regained her breath and turned to the Fairy Godmother, who looked sick as she held a handkerchief to her mouth. It didn't seem like a half-bad idea to Mal. The pollution was definitely worse, but hopefully, everything would go to plan without consequence.

Today was a very important day for Auradon and for the Isle. They had to tread very carefully because the effectiveness of Mal's plans all rode on how well she could execute this problem. They were going to restructure the barrier and replace it further out in the ocean, hopefully freeing a majority of the pollution without letting any villains escape.

They landed on the beach and Mal was amazed by what she saw as she descended the gangplank for the first time. The Moorish plants had been planted in intervals on the beach and Isle kids were examining the plants in awe. Around them, the grime and pollution had been removed in a near-perfect circle with a radius of about three feet. One near the beach revealed the natural white-yellow color of the sand. Mal stepped towards the plants to inspect them and took a deep breath. The air tasted fresh. There weren't many plants, but considering they'd been planted only a week before,

Fairy Godmother looked up at the buildings in approval. "They look wonderful." She commended Mal. "But let's not waste time. We need to clear the area."

"People will still try and stay and hide." Mal shook her head. "What I think we should do first is place a spell to prevent any magic users practicing their abilities while we fix the barrier. Then, we can break the top of the barrier and mold the utopia border as we need before we seal the top of the dirty part of the Isle and push everything out into the sea."

"I'll cast the first spell." Fairy Godmother decided. "Now, Mal, I don't know if you're able to see the magic in things yet. Are you?"

"No." Mal shook her head. "I can feel it though."

"Well enough." Fairy Godmother nodded. "Well, feel for my magic and I'll talk you through the barrier's weaving. Are you ready?"

Mal nodded. The Fairy Godmother pulled her wand out of her pocket and waved it with a "Bibbity-bobbity-boo!" Mal felt a heavy curtain of magic descend over the entire Island. She reached out with her subconscious and followed the spell's effects from where they began around her, all the way out to the sea. She smiled and then felt the Fairy Godmother's cool hands wrap around hers.

"For your first time working spell-less, it will probably be easier for you to be looking in the direction you'll be working." The Fairy Godmother advised. "Now, you have a feel for my spell, but can you feel what's above you?"

Mal turned her head skyward as the Fairy Godmother tilted her hands at an angle up to the sky. She searched carefully for something similar to the spell she'd just been examining and felt something strong in the sky. It was like an immense fortress. Like someone had coiled spikes and wire and lethal weapons into yarn and woven that yarn into a net that blockaded all magic and contained all within it. She frowned. "Wow. This thing is really strong."

"You can't break it." Fairy Godmother reminded her. "Not with the barrier blocking your magic. I'll have to do that with just a – bibbidy-bobbity-boo!" Mal felt the top of the barrier crumble away and gasped as she felt the entire opening of the dome split. She opened her eyes and watched something like an air tunnel appear in the sky sucking everything inside up and into the air. The air pressure dropped dramatically, and then cold, sea-smelling air hit her nose. The air began to clear, and Mal
could suddenly see even further than before. The air, too, began to clear.

"We have to work quickly." She gasped. "I want a new barrier along the outside of the walls we've built. Everyone already inside will be forced to the outside except for the Auradon Workers who sent their names to Auradon and whom I've cleared. I have their signatures keyed into a magical spell."

"Good." Fairy Godmother nodded approvingly as she raised her wand. The dark, thick smog clouds were growing even thinner. "Feel for the area you want the barrier, and let's build it up together."

Mal outstretched her arms and found the solid presence of the barrier walls. She traced the outline of the new barrier mentally – all around the walls and out into the ocean for a full mile before she paused and heard the Fairy Godmother say her magical words, and then the two women began pumping magic into a spell to enact a new barrier. This barrier would allow anyone in from the sea, and only people with cards in from the Isle. It would allow those inside to go outside, and it allowed breezes and currents from the ocean to filter through the area. Mal glanced over her shoulder and watched in awe as a rosy pink barrier began to appear around them. It started at ground level and rose higher and higher. The kids who had been down on the beach squealed as they were suddenly dragged, slowly, towards the rotten part of the Isle. Other shouts of surprise echoed from everywhere in the utopia as Isle kids still in the area were pulled out and placed on the edge of the utopia. The barrier sealed itself above her head, and Mal collapsed to the ground with her mouth feeling dry and her arms shaking. She hadn't even realized how exhausted she was.

The Fairy Godmother frowned. "You need to watch yourself carefully for signs of magical exhaustion." She told the young queen, kneeling down on the ground beside her and feeling her forehead quickly. "I can't tell if you're wearing yourself out or not. That's your job."

"Got it." Mal gasped. "Wow. That's amazing though." She glanced up at the clouds. "Those should thin out of the barrier just like over Auradon, right?"

"Yes." Fairy Godmother nodded. "Let's hold the barrier open a little longer to give you a rest and let some fresh air circulate." Mal nodded in agreement and one of the sailors from the ship approached her with a bottle of water.

They did the same thing with the second barrier, structuring it to end around the first and to go out into the ocean. Mal hoped that drawing more ocean water would help ease the ground and ocean pollution that the beaches saw so heavily. She and the Fairy Godmother looked briefly for ways to prevent more pollution accumulating, but Mal's magic and her energy were draining fast. She simply didn't have the reserves to be able to go for such long periods of time.

When the second barrier was closed, the spell block was removed, though that didn't mean anything for the villains still on the lower part of the Isle. It didn't do anything for Mal either. As soon as they finished, she collapsed onto her hands and knees with her eyes flashing dangerously. She was shaking so hard that the Fairy Godmother had to help her up to the buildings where the workers waited for the all-clear sign to finish work.

"Is that it?" Her contractor called when he saw her approaching building one with her arm around the Fairy Godmother. Mal raised a fist over her head in triumph before the Fairy Godmother helped her sit down on the cold, hard ground. The workers all threw their hats up in celebration. Mal laughed.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is the beginning of a new era!" One of the workers proclaimed.

Mal threw her head back and laughed. "It is!" She agreed. "Gosh, this is going to be amazing. Just
think, in a month or so people will be living here! I don't even know how to react!" She looked around at all the construction crews – the contractors, the safety overseers, the guards and the Isle kids who'd joined the construction crews. "Thank you all. Without you guys, I never would have been able to pull this off."

"Well, it's like you said, right?" One of the Isle kids piped up, rubbing his bare, cracked hands carefully with a bright, proud smile. Tiny tears made little tracks down his cheeks. "Each of us has the right, and a divine destiny to make the world better. We have the right to demand the best of ourselves, to pull ourselves up out of the darkness and to work towards that over-shining goal of Happily-Ever-After. Circumstances prevail against experience, but the magic of perseverance that's within each of us helps us continue to keep moving forward. We all work for a tomorrow that hasn't come yet and we need each other to lift us up and strengthen each other."

Mal's mouth dropped open. "You heard that?" She asked. "I didn't think it was being streamed to Auradon."

The young man shook his head. "It's the only true thing I ever heard the palace say." He announced, and all of the Isle kids nodded, along with several Auradonians.

A girl with large, buff arms and a thick neck reached forward to take Mal's hand. "You's the only royal to stand up for the villains." She sniffled. "I'd die for you, Queen Mal."

Mal's expression softened and she squeezed the girl's hand. "Oh, well, I don't need that. It'd be really nice if you lived for me though. Just live, and be happy, and be proud!" She looked all the way around the group. "We all accomplished something no one else thought we'd be able to do." She looked around and then pointed to an unopened case of water bottles behind one of the crew members. "Can you open that up?" She asked.

He ripped the case open, and everyone laughed as they passed around the plastic bottles, uncapped the lids, and raised them high to the sky. Mal's smile brightened when she saw the clouds, which were still being swept out to sea, part. A bright ray of sunshine fell down to the earth and hit one of the moorland plants down on the beach. A deep sense of pride filled her as she toasted her bottle.

"Here's to Happily-Ever-After!" She announced with a wild laugh. "Now available to Isle and Auradon kids alike!"

Everyone laughed wildly as they toasted their drinks to the sky. Mal tilted the bottle down her parched throat and let it run down into her system. Never before had bottled water tasted so good. Never before had victory been so sweet.

About ten paces outside the barrier, two children of Mother Gothel were conversing excitedly. "There's good air!" one exclaimed to the other with their hands shaking in excitement.

"And water!" The other exclaimed with bright red, rosy cheeks.

"And sand!"

"And sunshine!"

"And food!"

"And homes!"

"I'm going to go." One resolved firmly to the other. "This is our chance!"
"Do you think Mom will be able to go?" The other asked doubtfully.

"I don't know." The first answered. "But… we've got to take this chance. We can always come back and talk to her, right?"

"Right." The second agreed, sounding much more confident. "Let's start finding what we'll bring!"

The two scampered off into the woods, not noticing the dark shadow hanging out in the trees above them. The figure, a he, slumped against the trunk of the tree he'd climbed to see the action happen. And he wasn't quite sure what to think.

That was his best friend there. They were abusing his best friend. They were controlling her.

Mal was powerful. So powerful. So different from the last time he'd seen her. And she'd gotten infinitely more beautiful too. She barely even seemed human anymore. He couldn't understand how the palace could possibly be keeping such a tight hold on her still. Could it be that they had some sort of bribery against her to keep her in line, playing their good little hand puppet?

He swallowed. And the city. The city was white and gleaming above the rest of the Isle. His hands shook as he looked over the walls and watched Mal stand up shakily to take another water bottle, high-fiving those inside the walls and cheering. His heart twisted. How much pain was she covering up? How much heartache? How many times had that stupid prince abused her, stolen her freedom, and forced his hand on her? The thought made his blood absolutely boil.

He climbed down nimbly. He wasn't sure if he and his friends would join the city yet. The less the palace knew about them, the better it would be. So long as things didn't go badly, everything should be fine. Still, Maleficent was growing more and more anxious every day, wondering when her daughter was going to free her when it was so dastardly clear that Mal was being manipulated by the palace and had no true power. She was just a girl – a child. Despite all the strength and the power, she was still a young person being forced into the roles of a politician and a queen and, most regrettably, a wife. And all the duties and burden associated with these tasks at seventeen.

He dug his nails into his hands and bit his tongue until there was blood in his mouth. And he swore in his heart, he would one day rain down every hardship Mal had been forced through down on the head of that stupid, selfish, pedophilic king. So swear he on his father's name.

And so Jay vanished into the words to tell his friends what he'd witnessed.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, Frozen, Big Hero Six, Pocahontas, Peter Pan, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Pinochiccho, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Hercules, Meet the Robinsons, Mulan, Aladdin, Tangled, or 101 Dalmatians.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Mal learns about some nasty rumors of herself and Ben receives some news from the far north. They fight over Mal's status in Auradon, and later Ben apologizes. Mal returns to the Isle with Ericka in tow, and someone sees them leave.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Wait," Mal gasped through laughter. She and Queen Elsa were sitting in Belle's library underneath the large window. They were discussing Elsa's fairy tale. "So, she wanted to get married after knowing him for how long?"

"A day." Elsa chuckled. "She met him that morning when she ran into his horse."

Anna, who was sitting over on the couches with Ben, Belle, and Adam, whirled around in scarlet indignation. "He hit me; I did not hit him!" She protested.

Mal began to laugh even harder. "Sheesh, tough crowd. I mean, I don't suppose Ben and I are much better, but…" She shared an air high-five with her husband across the room, much to the chagrin of Elsa and Anna, who both began to chuckle and giggle.

"Anyway," Elsa continued as she regained her composure. "I freaked out and told Anna she couldn't marry a man she'd just met. Anna got mad and ripped off my glove in front of everyone trying to argue it was true love and that I couldn't possibly know what that was like. Without my glove, I couldn't contain my unstable magic, and I conjured some pretty lethal spikes and horrified the crap out of tons of people before I fled the kingdom over the fjord. Immediately after I left, the kingdom was cast into winter, and began to freeze."

Mal shook her head and pulled her legs up to her chest. "Tough crowd." She repeated. No wonder Auradon was so cautious of magic.

"Yeah." Elsa agreed. "I fled to the North Mountain, intent on staying up there until the day I died. I built myself a gigantic castle made of ice and I finally felt at peace with my powers because I knew I couldn't hurt anyone." Elsa held up an elegant hand and Mal watched as a frosty snowflake materialized from her fingertips. The air grew a little frosty. Mal smiled and held up a hand of her own. Her eyes lit up as she concentrated, and then small beads of green light appeared and formed into a flower from her hands. King Adam and Queen Belle exchanged cautious, uneasy looks.

"Ooh!" Jessie said from the floor where she'd been playing with several blocks that had been Ben's when he was younger. She stood up and pointed at the flower. "Preety!" She crowed.

Mal chuckled with a bright smile and bent down to press the flower into the four-year old's hand. Adam shuffled his feet back and sat up a little straighter, and Mal's eyes flicked up to examine her father-in-law.

From the far side of the library came a sneeze, followed by a minor explosion. Everyone glanced
over to see where Ericka was sheepishly sitting against a bookshelf, skimming a heavy tome about Nordic Legends. "Sorry!" She exclaimed. The walls around her were icy and snow was falling from a little cloud into her hair. Already though, the climate was retreating back into Ericka.

Mal examined Ericka as the twenty-two-year-old tried to stifle a blush. She put a hand on her knee and curled her toes into her shoes. "Do you need a wand? Or some sort of focus?" She asked aloud.

Ericka shrugged. "Never tried." She admitted.

Mal wanted to ask her how her dad's powers were focused, but she had a feeling the question wouldn't be well appreciated.

Mal's phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out to glance at the screen and was surprised to see a news article headline with her name in it. Across the room, Ben, Belle, and Adam were already pulling out their phones as well. Confused and insulted expressions froze their way onto their faces.

"What?" Mal asked, aloud.

"This is horse bull," Ben exclaimed, standing up. "Excuse me, I need to look into this." He began to walk briskly to the exit, typing furiously.

"What is it?" Elsa asked.

Mal tilted the screen so the ice queen could read. "As photos of the royal couple with Elsa of Arendelle grace the internet, rumors of Queen Mal's infertility persist." She read aloud. "That's such ridiculousness! Who started this?" She swiped on the notification and went to her news app. As soon as the screen loaded, she was assaulted by beautiful full-color pictures of the day before; Elsa reaching up to take Mal's hand with a bright smile. Ben looking at Mal as she addressed the reporters with a serious, yet happy smile. The most popular were those of Mal picking up little Jessie and holding her hand with a bright, proud smile. More headlines read: "A source close to the palace has revealed that the queen may be unable to have children," and "Queen Mal seems to like kids a lot; but will she ever have any of her own?"

Belle cleared her throat from the couches and began to read aloud: "We have it on good word from an undisclosed source close to the former King and his wife that choosing Mal, of all the villain children, to be a queen was anything short of a coincidence. 'This marriage is not intended to last.' Said our anonymous helper. 'The palace wanted to demonstrate an act of goodwill to the Isle of the Lost and find an easy way to rid themselves of the downfalling community, so they picked Mal from the Isle based on several characteristics. One of those is that she is completely infertile due to early self-mutilation. King Adam told me himself that they wanted to be sure no small children's lives would be torn apart when Auradon Officials decide to terminate the King and Queen's marriage.'"


"Those are some pretty upsetting claims," Belle said in a hushed tone.

"Early self-mutilation?" Mal asked. "What?"

Belle turned off her phone, looking a little green. Mal suspected the article might go on to describe some fairly descriptive rumors of how exactly that might have happened. She felt trapped. "What should we do?" She asked in between a heavy breath.

Belle shook her head. "Wait." She frowned and glanced to the door Ben had vanished behind. Mal
understood. Ben got to call shots on how the official palace addressed the falsities.

Mal exhaled and picked her phone back up. She went straight to the palace website to find the BIG NEWS section flooded with false reports of slander. She loaded her private page up and typed a quick message: "Wow, I didn't know I was infertile. I wonder how I managed to mutilate myself without dying of infection on the Isle of the Lost."

She posted the caption and exhaled. Elsa patted her shoulder in sympathy. She probably knew what it was like to find out someone was spreading lies about herself.

A notification appeared at the top of her screen. It was a message from Ben. She opened her text messages and found his contact. He'd sent a screenshot of a personal social media post by someone Mal recognized very well with the caption: "I bet I know which 'close palace source' started this."

She pressed a hand to her mouth and took a deep breath.

A post by Princess Audrey Fanning read, "I don't know what exactly was going on in the months before Ben and I broke up, but it's clear even to an outsider that their marriage was kept quiet while being rushed ahead. I think it's very possible that this could have, in fact, been a last-minute decision on behalf of the palace to show how good Auradon was to the Isle. On the subject of Mal being infertile, I think it's equally plausible. People tend to treasure what they can't have. Why else would a villainess (Or even a daughter of one) become so happy whenever children are present such as when she stopped outside her wedding and yesterday with Queen Elsa's daughter?"

Mal turned off her phone. "Audrey's supporting the claims." She sighed.

"Oh." Belle made a disappointed face.

"It's fine." Mal sighed, hugging her legs to her chest with a deep frown. "I know I'm not, so it doesn't matter what she says." She set her jaw.

The door opened to the library. Ben reappeared with Lumiere behind him. "Mal." He called across the large room. Everyone stared at him as he beckoned. "I need to borrow you really quick."

Mal untucked her legs and stood up. "I'll be right back." She told Elsa. "You needn't worry."

She walked past everyone, taking a second to glance at Ericka, who now was reading a book on famous magical spirits. Ben held the door open for her as she slipped outside.

"Is this about the reports?" Mal asked as he shut the door. Ben sighed as he let his hand slip off of the wood and turned towards her.

"No, mademoiselle," Lumiere said in a hushed tone. He was clutching a grey paper in his hands. "A report of danger has come from the Great Forest."

"Bambi's family rules there now." Ben rolled his eyes. "It's its own island. That's where all the sentient creatures in Auradon, like Cinderella's birds and mice, come from. We don't really go over there much."

"Right." Mal decided not to question how a deer retained ruling rights when Beast, an obvious predator, took over the reins on Auradon. Or even how they'd managed to get a message to Auradon.

Lumiere wrung his hands. "An entire island disappeared into the sea two hours ago."
Mal blinked. "It just… collapsed?"

"A monster was spotted off the coast," Ben whispered. His brow was furrowed. "Something unidentifiable, large, with tentacles. The island shook, and then was dragged down into the sea."

Mal stared at Ben. "How big was the island, exactly?"

"Smaller than the Isle," Ben assured her. "Maybe the size of the palace grounds. Uninhabited for the most part. The Kuzkonian empire, Agrabah, and Zootopia all sent reports of seeing it fall, though."

Mal put her hands in her jean pockets. "So, why are you telling me this?" She asked calmly.

"I… wanted your advice," Ben mumbled. "What do you think we should do?"

Mal exhaled and shifted her weight from foot to foot as she thought. "Alert possible swimmers in the area?" She suggested.

Ben laughed. Mal gave him a look, and he shut up. She continued. "Yeah, heighten coastal protections and keep an eye out for it. If possible, send professional divers down to examine the sunken island to gather more information on what it was." Mal suggested, and hesitated. "Is there any chance they could bring me back like, a rock they know it touched for sure or something so that I can see if it's magical? Because if so, do that."

Ben nodded. "Okay. I see your points, and I'll ask about bringing any samples back to the palace. It'd have to be within reason though. My worry is we can't defend outright if we don't know what it is. I say we also send a patrol boat out to ping the ocean floor using radar and see if they can locate anything using that technology."

"What if they find it?" Lumiere asked.

"Closest empire to the forest in the Kuzkonian Empire. Kuzko's is a bit, ahem, dramatic…" Ben trailed off.

"Sassy?" Lumiere added, smirking a little. Mal raised an eyebrow. Sounded like her kind of people.

Ben nodded. "Yes. I'm not sure what long-range weaponry they'd have." He put his hands into his pockets.

"Well, Zootopia is also nearby. They're a coastal city, so wouldn't they have a navy?" Mal asked, folding her arms across her chest.

Ben nodded again. "They would. I wish I could send the Auradon imperial navy to take care of the problem quickly, but it'd be a three-day trip around the continent, and then to mobilize them…"

The moment those words left Ben's mouth, a black feeling welled up in Mal's chest. She pressed a hand to her sternum and swayed on her feet. The feeling felt… evil. Masochistic.

"Ben." She drew his attention. "You should send the Navy."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "Why? It'll take about a week for them to get up there, and I'm sure that the Zootopian forces will be more than enough."

"No." Mal protested firmly. "You need to send them up now."

Ben wrinkled his nose. "Why?" He asked. "Zootopia's navy should be more than up to par."
Mal's eyes flashed and Lumiere took a step back, eyeing Ben to see what he'd do. Mal balled up her fists. "Ben, send them north. We're going to need them soon. Please, just do it. Don't forget, you owe me one. You said name your price and I want the navy in the north to protect the cities up there."

Ben stared at her strangely and pinched his lips together as if he were solving a puzzle he wasn't sure he liked the answer to. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I'll look into the matter and see if they're needed, but I'm sure the Zootopian forces can handle it until then." He turned to Lumiere. "Thank you for your help. I'll send word immediately."

Lumiere nodded and took that as a sign to take his leave down the hall. Ben turned to Mal. "I'm sorry to pull you out, but I needed a third person's advice and since you're queen I thought – are you okay?"


Ben stared at her for a few seconds and then patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about it too much. I'm sure everything will be fine. They'll find it, and it'll all work out."

Mal wasn't quite so sure, but she trusted Ben to do what was right in the end.

"I have something I need to ask you," Ben mumbled against his pillow as soon as he knew she was awake. Mal had just let her eyes drift open and was stretching her feet out as she yawned.

"What?" She asked, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and getting up to glance out the foggy window. It was raining today, but she had to make a trip to the Isle to finalize building plans and make sure everything was completed before she allowed new citizens into her city. She began mentally preparing an outfit – thick leggings, boots, and a waterproof coat – and suddenly remembered with tremendous guilt her gifts for her Isle friends that had never gone over and had never been delivered. She realized what they were missing – an invitation. 'Please, come see me in the city. I can't wait to tell you about everything.'

"Where did you get your speech from?" Ben yawned, rolling over and staring at the ceiling. His shirt was twisted a little around his arms.

Mal shrugged. "I dunno. I just started talking and tried to not mess up." She stepped into her closet and shut her door. "Why?" She raised her voice a little as she began to pick out a warm pair of socks and a thick shirt.

"I've never heard you talk about Auradon like that," Ben called. She heard his side of the bed creak, but there were no footsteps, so she assumed he'd just sat up and started looking at his schedule on his phone. "You, ah, usually go on like you hate us and we can't do anything right."

"Considering that you guys isolated the moorlands, created the Isle, and then also taking into account your friends alone, aren't I justified?" Mal asked.

"My friends aren't usually that bad." Ben sighed. "Chad, well, I'd like to see him with a broken nose at the moment. Not even going to lie. And Audrey needs to leave you the living daylights alone. But Jane and Lonnie and Aziz are chill."

Mal opened the door and walked to sit on the edge of their bed. Her hair felt like a jumble of rope or twine. She stifled a yawn. "Why are you asking about my speech?"
Ben skimmed her outfit over the top of his phone and then returned his eyes to the screen. "It was just really good. You know, I wouldn't have really expected that of someone with your background."

"From the Isle?" Mal asked flatly.

Ben gave her a patronizing look. "You know I mean that in the best way possible." He reminded her. Mal rolled her eyes and sulked a little – even though she knew the feeling he was trying to convey. "I mean, it's not like I could be put on the Isle and know the background and all the rules and what people like to hear right off the bat. You're good at relating to Auradon's level of thinking."

"Quit while you're ahead," Mal suggested, sliding off of the covers and opening the adjoining room doors. She wandered into the bathroom to find a brush and then began to return to the bedroom for her phone. Before she could re-enter the room, she heard Ben let out a defeated groan. "More crazy news stories?" She asked and began to walk to grab her phone. Ben had finally swung his legs off of the bed and was glaring at his phone screen.

"No." He sighed. "Well, yes, but no. I just… I double-booked myself again today. I need to reschedule my meeting with emergency services before they start to head up here."

Mal wrinkled her nose. "I have to head out to the Isle." She told him. "But if you need, I can stall so I can cover for you."

"Absolutely not." Ben scoffed and shook his head. He pressed a number on his phone. He raised the phone to his ear, still facing away from her as Mal's hands dropped to her sides and she stared at his back incredulously. "Hey, is this the Emergency Services department?" He began, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Yes, thank you, this is Benjamin Benson, from the palace. I was hoping we could reschedule by about… two hours?"

Mal continued frowning at his frame, hooking her fingers into her belt loops. Several conflicting emotions filled her. She thought she'd done okay? Sure, there had been that scene with Chad, but for the most part, people liked her. Was there something special about Emergency Services that she wasn't allowed to cover for that meeting? That it had to be the king there?

Ben finished his call with a "Thank you, see you in a few hours." He ended the call and shook his head. "Someone should keep track of me when I'm sleep deprived. I obviously can't make any legible decisions."

"We ought to get you a secretary," Mal grumbled dryly. Ben turned and furrowed his brow at her tone. Mal sat down on her side with a sour look.

"What?" Ben asked, turning back around and raising an eyebrow at her.

"What's with your 'absolutely not'?" Mal snapped. "I thought you said I did good?"

Ben blinked and looked taken aback like she'd just spun him in a circle twenty times. "You did do good. But I told you. I'm not going to ask you to cover Auradon again." He reminded her.

"I'm getting two very different messages here." Mal sulked.

"It's not you – it's Auradon." Ben rolled his eyes and leaned across the sheets to put a hand on her cheek. "You did amazing. Your speech was fabulous. Everyone was really impressed with your humor and your swordsmanship. You really gave the people a glimpse of how amazing you are. But people don't respect you, and it makes me angry. And this isn't a public event, it's an actual sit-
down meeting where we're going over all the accidents that have happened in Auradon this past year and we're reviewing emergency policies and possibly arranging for additional funding. They're not going to respect a seventeen-year-old girl from the Isle of the Lost who doesn't even know Auradon's emergency number. And you're just going to get angry because of the different situation you grew up in."

Mal narrowed her eyes at her feet. She didn't need to know Auradon's emergency number – she could just tell someone else to page an ambulance or law enforcement or whatever. And there was probably a button on her phone that would do it... somewhere. She felt Ben drawing in to kiss her cheek and stopped him with a hand. "So, it's because of my age and the fact I grew up on the Isle?" She asked.

Ben seemed to sense he was in trouble. "It's not the Isle so much as there's no way I could possibly explain everything you'd need to know before my first meeting." He glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed.

"And my age?" Mal asked, grinding her teeth a little.

"What about it?" Ben asked. "None of those forty-year-olds want to be bossed around by a twenty-two-year-old, let alone a girl who's seventeen."

"And from the Isle?" Mal reaffirmed.

"Hey," Ben tried, sighing. "Come on, you know what I mean."

"Am I always just going to be the girl from the Isle to you?" Mal snapped irritably. "Is that just my entire persona to you?"

"Aren't I the boy from Auradon to you?" Ben challenged half-heartedly. "But for the record, no. It's just that's where you come from. It's a part of you."

"But isn't all of me." Mal pointed out.

"Never said it was." Ben tread carefully. He examined her sour expression and sighed. "Hey, listen, I have to go. Can we talk about this later? I didn't mean to make you angry. Can we just forgive and forget and talk about it later?"

Mal sighed and nodded half-heartedly. Ben exhaled in relief. "If you wait for me, I'll walk you down to breakfast." He suggested.

Mal shrugged without a response, so Ben got off the bed and disappeared into his closet. Mal unplugged her phone and drummed her fingers on the dark screen, simmering a little bit as she listened to him get dressed. She slipped it into her pocket with a swallow. She didn't move when she heard the knob click and only closed her eyes when she felt his gaze land on her. There were footsteps, light and cushioning as he walked across the room on the carpet, and she felt him bend down beside her. Deep, dark silence stretched out like a moat between the two of them. Mal felt like she might as well have been back on the Isle for all the divisions that were suddenly between them. She didn't dare open her eyes.

Ben put his hand back on her cheek in a moment of stillness. Her brain must have missed a brainwave or something, because, in the space of about half a second, his breath was on her mouth. She inhaled a little of his morning breath and leaned back. "Maybe we should talk about this," She snapped, getting up and taking a step towards the window. Ben blinked in surprise. His hair was still messed up (and her brush was on the bed, forgotten), and he'd gotten dressed in, of all things, a
suit. Mal narrowed her eyes. Prissy pink princess and perfect princes. She didn't see why Auradon would think they were all that when they had two expectations.

"Talk about…” He trailed off cautiously. The careful tone of his voice made everything even worse. What, was she some sort of bomb?

"You know I'm going to leave, right?" She reminded him with a flash of her eyes. "You can't keep me here. As soon as that spell is broken, I'm going to leave and all of this," She waved her finger back and forth between him and her, "Will end."

Ben flinched. Badly. He looked away from her as if her image suddenly caused him pain. "I know." He mumbled. "I'm not going to control you."

"No, you're not." Mal agreed with angry, unintelligible tears filling her eyes. "You can't keep me here with… movies and strawberries and car trips and…” She sniffled and wrinkled her nose.

Ben glanced back over at her and opened his arms. Like a fool, she dropped to the floor and buried her face in his chest. Gosh, he'd gotten her to move back to him so easily. And she couldn't pull away as he started rubbing little circles with his nails on her back. It was like her joints were locking up to force her to remain still as she was breathing in some lingering cologne that he'd sprayed on yesterday and relishing the feeling of his muscles under his shirt.

"I'm going to leave," Mal repeated hopelessly. "And this will all end. The snow kisses and Christmases and… joking about you on national television." Ben's grip tightened on her arms at her words. "And the phone calls and-" She broke off, finally. Her throat was too tight to continue as she forced herself to picture it. One day, she'd leave this room for the last time. That would be it. They'd see each other for meetings occasionally. They'd exchange glances and she'd know that he was reminiscing about when they'd been married and when they lived together. He'd shake her hand, maybe touch her shoulder, and nothing else. She'd spitefully call his favorite alcohol a brandy just to watch him pinch his lips and maybe he'd have a glass every once in a while to remember her by.

Her throat was so tight she could barely breathe, and her nose felt like it was broken since it was stinging so bad. She inhaled slowly and it was as if the room had suddenly filled with water. She was about to cry and yet she couldn't get away from him. How could she expect to leave the palace if she couldn't even get out of his arms?

That was the thought that did it. She pushed him back a little and fell back on her tailbone, hurriedly wiping her eyes to stop the tears as she took deep breaths. Ben leaned towards her with an outstretched hand and she stopped him. "Don't," She gasped. "Don't touch me – don't kiss me." She knew she wouldn't be able to get away again.

"Do you really want to leave?" Ben asked softly.

"I'm not staying." Mal snapped. She felt like she was waging an entire war inside of her. On one side, her desperation to not be trapped and her wish to get away and be free. And on the other, the remainder of what a relief it was to come home to him.

"But is that what you want?" Ben asked, even firmer.

"Are you trying to guilt trip me?" Mal demanded. "I told you, I'm not staying!"

"I didn't ask if you were!" Ben snapped, reaching forward and taking her jaw. "You've kissed me before. You've wanted me before. You've missed me. And I don't know what's going through your
head – do I even mean anything to you? Were you just caught up in our *lies* to Auradon? Because I could have sworn for a second that you cared for me."

"Care for you? I’m from the Isle!" Mal snapped, batting his hand aside. "Why would I ever care for a prince who spent his whole life in a palace with wonderful parents and friends and—"

"It sounds like you're trying to figure out where you stand." Ben scoffed.

"I know where I stand!" Mal insisted. "I stand with those on the Isle and in the moorlands. You know, the people *your country* suppresses."

"And yet you can preach a sermon on how Auradon college kids are going to grow up and be our next heroes." Ben pointed out with a bland tone. Mal's eyes lit up in fierce rage.

"So what if I can?" She hissed, wrapping her arms around herself protectively. "They might grow up and be honest people. I believe in change."

"So do I, and I think you've changed." Ben declared. "Because that *Isle girl* who climbed out of the palace limo last July would never have let me kiss her like you've been letting me the last few months. So tell me now: Do you really want to go?"

The silence intensified. Ben and Mal locked gazes, staring each other down. A hot feeling was burning in her belly and her fists were balled up so tightly her knuckles were going grey.

The small, rational part of her head that wasn't bent on trying to come up with a witty response to launch back at him was whispering. 'Do you really think you can leave now? After everything? Won't you miss him even a little bit?'

Ben took her face with both hands and leaned towards her a little. His eyes flicked down to her mouth. "I don't want you to go." He admitted. "You've got to tell me – swear to me – that you'll be happy if the curse is broken. You'll be happy when the time comes for our last kiss, and the last time we're in a room together, and the last of the secrets. I want to see the honesty in your eyes. So tell me how excited you are to get away. Tell me you can't wait for your *freedom.*" He leaned in more, and there his breath was again. "Tell me you don't care about me, even a little." He whispered and leaned into her frame. Mal's head landed against the nightstand and there it was, that kiss he wanted. Her hands stopped shaking and her head cleared a little before her heart shriveled in her chest.

So that was it then. Was it already too late? When had they actually crossed the line where they'd never be able to truly say goodbye? She'd never even realized. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away. He stared at her, waiting for her response. She sniffed and turned away. "Please – get out." She snapped, covering her face up.

"I – what?" Ben asked, clearly confused.

"Get out!" Mal broke down. "I don't want to see you anymore! I don't want you around me! Just get out and – and don't come back!" She pulled a pillow off of the bed and flung it at him before she got up.

"Mal, come on," Ben tried to stop her by grabbing her hand, but she pulled away. She was so, so dangerously close to tears.

"Don't touch me!" Mal demanded. "Don't kiss me, don't hold me, I don't want to do anything with you right now. Just leave!"
Ben held his hands up in acquiescence, but his backing off didn't feel like a victory. On the
contrary, it felt like a failure, and he knew it. Mal shook her head, scrubbing at her eyes, and turned
away. "You have your meeting soon." She reminded him and left the room. Her heart felt like it'd
been rendered into at least ninety pieces. Magic-infused tears were leaving green marks under her
eyes. She opened the door and heard a gear sliding. She pointed to the source of the sound and
Ericka's latest prank exploded in a collection of gelatin, ice, and sled pieces that were designed to
take her straight down the hall. There was a long pause, and then Ericka herself looked around the
corner in stunned surprise. Ben walked out of their bedroom and came to see what the noise was
without a word.

"Are you…okay?" Ericka asked slowly.

Mal scoffed and turned to stalk off down the hallway. She listened to Ericka approach the
remnants of her prank as Ben let out an inhale. "Sorry," He whispered. "She's… angry at me." He
let out a sigh. "Just... teenagers."

"Geesh, man, good luck," Ericka mumbled. Mal clenched her fists together and hurried away faster
before anything else could happen.

After she returned from the Isle, Mal disappeared to her old room for a few hours as she thought
through her feelings. A plastic baggie full of strawberries was hidden in her jacket pocket, which
she ate one by one as she looked at the dust that had settled on the bookcase and on the desk. Her
phone used to charge here, and the balcony was high because Belle and Adam had been worried
she'd escape. The bath supplies had been moved upstairs with Mal, but the room was otherwise
unchanged.

Mal opened up the now-empty closet and sat down just inside the door like she had when she'd
first come and had a panic attack. She shut off the light and closed the door so all she could see
was the natural light coming in through the glass to the balcony and turned on her phone. She went
to the castle page and typed up a status update.

"We have people crowding outside of the city and wondering if we're done yet. Honestly feel like
I've done a good thing."

After a while, she opened the closet and walked out through the glass doors to the balcony. She
hadn't really used the balcony a lot when she'd lived in her room, and now she was given so much
freedom the idea of it was kind of funny. She went to a corner of the balcony and used the corner
where the railing connected to the wall to edge her way up and on top of the railing.

Down on the grounds below, Mal spotted Sophia and Stewart walking towards the front entrance
of the castle together. Sophia had a basket under her arm that looked like it held mail, and her other
hand was held by Stewart. Mal watched them walk until they faded out of sight. She smiled. They
were cute.

Mal took a photo of the balcony from where she was sitting and put it on the castle web with the
caption: "I don't really open up on my feelings about Auradon much, but here's something that
cracks me up a little. When I first came to Auradon, Belle and Adam weren't quite sure what I'd be
like. They put me in a room with a slightly higher balcony. The idea was that I would be less likely
to run off and wreak havoc, even though it's only about a little taller than I can reach and there's
plenty of moveable furniture in the room. I guess they felt a little better even though it'd have been
easy to get out if I wanted."

King Adam immediately liked her caption, which made Mal's face turn a little red.
She scrolled a little through Belle's reading list and Adam's political opinions before she looked at what Ben had been posting lately. Since he'd become king, his page had started mirroring his father's a little more, but there was still the occasional cheesy 'We are amazing' essay. She'd noticed that, as the months had gone by, Ben was less 'We are great' and more 'We will be great'. She was proud of him for looking for places to improve, even though at this point in time it made her feel incredibly guilty.

A text post on Ben's page caught her eye. She smiled as she read it.

"My mom's posts are all: I loved this book, this one was okay, and I LOATHED this one. And Dad's are: My son is doing a great job running this country and all you who don't agree with him can go screw yourselves. Then mine: Guys we can do this if we stick together and start by working out small problems like theseeeeee.

"And meanwhile, Mal, who runs two countries herself, is posting about her everyday random thoughts and taking selfies with all the servants and her best friend Sophia.

"We're so different, guys."

She chuckled and started scrolling through the comments on his post.

"Belle's reading list is fantastic! She and I have such similar thoughts!"

"That is actually the perfect way to describe King Adam's page."

"Queen Mal's page is one of my most favorite places. She's so uniquely random and it's great."

"I feel like I visit the current Queen's page more than any other place on the interweb."

Mal's smile faded a little as she read: "I really like Queen Mal's page, but she acts more like a girl than a queen. Sometimes I flip through her posts and realize exactly how young she really is. I mean, she posts pictures of candy, messy hair, and her beau. Not exactly a country leader."

Mal scrolled to her page and typed up a second post. "People are hard. Emotions are confusing. Tell me again why I can't just eat strawberries and ignore problems?"

And then she stared because, despite everything, she was still proving people's assumptions about her correct.

The door from the hallway opened and Mal turned over her shoulder. It was Ben. He hesitated as he looked across the room at her and swallowed. "Am I allowed in?" He asked.

Mal shrugged and turned back to the screen in front of her, pulling the blanket up around her shoulders. "It's your room too." She mumbled.

"That statement sounds like a trap," Ben mumbled. He walked up behind her and glanced at her setup. She'd taken control of the couch, the coffee table, and the TV. The box of videos was open at her feet, a large pitcher of water and a half-empty glass were sitting in front of her, and she was curling miserably into the cushions. "Is that Maleficent?"

"Technically, it's Aurora." Mal shrugged, twisting the top off of a strawberry. She watched the young child onscreen wander closer and closer to the cliff. The scene cut to a woman with killer cheekbones sitting next to a hyperventilating raven. "That's Maleficent." Mal nodded to the screen.
Ben nodded at the figure onscreen. "Does she look anything like-"

"No." Mal shook her head. Ben flinched as the sound of a child falling off of a cliff echoed from the speakers before he watched a branch grow to save her. "Nah, Mom wore black lipstick and her face was way smaller than the lady who's playing in this. And anyway, according to the moorpeople, this scene never happened. Maleficent didn't give a crap about Aurora while she was growing up. They never interacted."

"So which movie is actually correct?" Ben asked, frowning as he leaned on the back of the couch.

"Neither." Mal hummed. "And both, in certain ways." Mal paused to bite her strawberry as she continued thinking. "There was lots of confusion because after Stefan died the first time, Queen Leah had a story and Maleficent had a story and everyone in the kingdom had a story and Aurora had absolutely no clue what was going on."

Ben nodded along to her words. "And then she became queen and-"

"Not for a few years." Mal cut him off with a shake of her head. "Leah was in charge and she was very… vocal about everything? But Maleficent did make Aurora the ruler of the moors. She'd explored there a lot as a child. Most of Auroria thought Maleficent was dead and she was sick of being hunted by everyone, so she passed her responsibilities on and stepped back until, of course, Auradon came along to ruin things for her."

Ben hummed. He disappeared from behind her for another few seconds and then returned. He reached over her head and set down a large plastic container in front of her. Mal blinked and furrowed her brow. "What's this?" She asked and cracked the lid open.

"A peace offering," Ben replied sarcastically. Mal snorted when she saw a pile of strawberries hidden under the lid. In the corner of the box was a sealed container of what looked like sugar. "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Well, I snapped at you." Mal sighed. She paused the movie and moved her legs before gesturing to the vacant spot. Ben walked around the couch and sat down. Mal held out her container to offer him a strawberry. He shook his head with a laugh.

"No, no, that's your gift." He told her. Mal hummed as she picked one up and twisted the stem off. He cleared his throat. "But, um, here is my apology. I'm sorry I brushed you off, I'm sorry for jumping down your throat and kissing you and making you cry."

"I didn't cry." Mal frowned. "I don't cry. There were no tears." She narrowed her eyes and dared Ben to challenge her. He didn't. She sighed. "Well, I kind of need to apologize too. I shouldn't have started picking fights about things that don't really matter."

"Don't matter?" Ben repeated with a frown.

"Yeah. I mean, it's your kingdom. And you'd already had everything figured out." Mal shrugged. Ben put his hand next to hers on her leg. His face was masked over with a puzzled look. "And everything else?" He asked.

Mal shrugged. "Well, it's inevitable, right? Eventually, the curse will be broken." She hesitated. "But I don't know if we'll change that much. I mean, you'll be the only member of the royal party again and I won't live here, but I think we'll always be friends."

"Friends." Ben nodded, leaning back into the couch.
"Best friends," Mal affirmed, though her mouth felt dry.

Ben didn't say anything. He moved his hand back, off of her leg. They locked eyes. Mal swallowed a little. "You don't agree?" She asked.

Ben shook his head and clasped his hands together. "No. No, you're my best friend. Without a doubt, you're the only person I'm allowed to talk with."

Mal blinked slowly. Ben glanced towards the TV as if he wished she'd start it back up again and sighed when he realized there wasn't a chance. "It's going to be weird when you're not around." He sighed. "I'll miss you." He met her eyes as she put a fist under her chin. "You already know I love you." He whispered.

Mal curled her toes up and swallowed. "Ben… I can't…"

"I know." Ben sighed. "But my feelings shouldn't stop you leaving. I'll be okay." But his voice cracked, and he looked away, and Mal felt another dark cloud descend over them.

"Maybe they won't break the curse." Mal sighed, picking at a thread in the blanket. "What then?"

Ben combed his fingers through his hair. "I don't want to steal your life away but… we can't live without each other." He glanced over at her. "Maybe if the curse side effects could be contained. But if you spend too long away from me, you'll turn…" He trailed off.

Mal leaned her head back against the bars. She tried to imagine a life where the curse was never broken. It didn't honestly seem that different from her one right now until she considered that they'd only grow older. One day, someone would have to have the future heir of Auradon. Right now, that someone looked like it'd be her, and that terrified her.

"What does it feel like to be in love?" She asked in a dead tone. Ben's mouth crooked up at the corners.

"Amazing." He whispered. "I feel like I could do anything. And I feel… supported. Like, I know you won't go behind my back."

"I thought love was supposed to make you weak?" Mal asked.

"Does your love for the Isle make you weak?" Ben asked.

No, it most certainly did not. Mal nodded thoughtfully and reached a hand towards him. He took it and squeezed her palm to his. "I guess it doesn't make sense to talk now about it." She mumbled. "No one knows when – or if – they'll break the curse." She swallowed. "I guess I'll just plan on staying until the option opens up that I can leave."

"It doesn't make sense to pack everything up and wait for a day that may be years away." Ben nodded in agreement. "What about… us?"

Mal shrugged. "I guess we go on as we've been?"

"So, talking, joking, hugging, and kissing are all okay?" Ben asked, counting off on his fingers. Mal nodded without a sound as her cheeks turned a tiny bit pink. Ben let out a long breath and stared at her. She blinked softly.

"Is there something else?" She asked in a small whisper.
Ben swallowed. "I – there's been something on my mind." He admitted. "But I don't think it's the right time for me to talk with you about it. Maybe later."

Mal turned her head to the side as a deep red tone set into his cheeks and he looked away. "Okay," She mumbled. Ben cleared his throat.

"But, there is something else on a different note." He straightened up. "I wanted to ask you about that magical thing you learned to do at the moors. I wanted to see it but we've both been rushing around."

Mal flinched and glanced back towards the door. It was shut. She exhaled. "Yeah, I can show you." She agreed. "But… it's different. Makes me more like my mom than I thought."

"Can you turn into a dragon?" Ben asked, frowning at the size of the room.

Mal shook her head. "No, or at least not that I know of." She pushed the blanket off of her legs and cleared her throat. She brushed her hair back and her horns appeared, growing out of her head. "You already knew I could do this," She began with a little sigh.

Ben smiled and leaned forward, wrapping a hand around the base of one of her horns. The black color made the purple seem more vibrant. "Wow." He told her, trying to ignore that fire that had erupted like an actual volcano in his chest. Oh, she was so cool. Oh, she was so cool. Mal chuckled and decided not to say anything on how engrossed he looked. "You don't even have to focus anymore." He whispered as he ran a thumb up and down her horns. The black surface was textured and warm to the touch.

Mal shrugged. "Yeah. I actually tend to wear them normally when I'm in the moors. But, the fae also taught me how to do… something else." She took Ben's hand from where it was wrapped around her left horn and instead placed it in between her shoulder blades. "Don't freak out." She cautioned.

Ben had a feeling he knew what was coming. He spread his fingers out on her shirt back. Mal's t-shirt covered her entire back. But as Ben let his hand rest just inches under her neck, he noticed that the shirt started to recoil underneath her shoulder blades until two neat holes had formed. Two lumps formed on Mal's back, which quickly expanded. Ben withdrew his hands and leaned back as he watched two large, beautiful wings begin to grow and stretch into existence.

"Wow." Was all he could say. Mal chuckled nervously and moved her wings out so he could see the full girth and volume of them. They were almost twice as long as her normal arm-span on either side and soft and feathery, like her mom's had been. They were also a royal shade of purple, just a little darker than her hair, which Mal had moved in front of her shoulder before she'd let them grow out. They were longer than they were wider and extended from just below Mal's shoulder blades. They were tall too, slightly longer than her torso and stretching over her head.

"That's wicked cool," Ben said softly.

Mal laughed. "Wicked, you say?" She asked, turning to face Ben. She withdrew her wings so that they wouldn't hit him as she moved, and Ben was amazed to see how the wings curled up behind her arms so naturally, almost as if they were meant to go there. They looked like a gigantic coat that she was using as a cloak. She leaned back into the couch and anyone who walked in would have been excused for thinking she was leaning against a feathery pillow or blanket.

"That's amazing." Ben sighed. He stroked the length of one of her wings and was pleased when
Mal shivered. "You can feel that?" He exhaled, and then put two hands on the wing. Mal shook.

"Yeah. My horns have no feeling, but my wings are sensitive. I'm told the more I use them, the less sensitive they'll be." Mal smirked at his awed expression.

"Can you fly?" Ben asked. Mal stood up and extended her wings before she gave them two incredibly powerful flaps that lifted her a few feet off the ground. Her pitcher slid back a few inches.

"I once flew along the river for a few hundred feet," Mal said as she came back down and sat beside Ben. "I can't do big distances yet."

"And that'll help you get away from the palace more?" Ben asked.

Mal shrugged. "I need more practice, and I need to know Auradon won't freak out." She took another breath and Ben watched as both her wings and her horns disappeared. The rips in the back of her shirt mended themselves automatically, and suddenly Mal was back to normal. She pulled her blanket back up around her shoulders.

Ben shook his head and put his elbows on his knees as he ran his hands through his hair. Mal raised an eyebrow. "What?" She asked.

Ben shook his head and stood up. "I, um, I'm going to get some air."

Mal deflated suddenly. "Do you not like them?" She asked, standing back up.

"No, no." Ben smiled and put his hands on her shoulders. "They're amazing. I'm kind of jealous, really." He took his hand back. His fingers were trembling with exertion. "I'm just going to take a quick walk." He swallowed.

"What did I do wrong?" Mal asked. She twisted her hands together. "You look… flushed."

Ben exhaled. "You did nothing wrong." He promised. "It's just me. I promise."

"Ben." Mal took his hand from his side and tilted her head to try and get him to look at her. "Talk to me."

Ben met her eyes. Mal felt all the air changing around her. He put his hand on her side and pulled her snug into his side with a whoosh. Mal put her hands on his shoulders to stabilize herself as he freed his other hand from hers and set it on her face before he brought her mouth to his.

Mal closed her eyes. They slowly fell back onto their couch. He was on top of her, carefully keeping his hands on her side and on her neck, and his frame was so tense she wondered how long he'd been wanting to do this. His mouth left hers and went down to her jawline, where he kissed the skin there before finally dropping onto her neck. "I'm going to stop." He promised, pressing more kisses onto her.

Mal gasped a little for breath before Ben withdrew onto his knees on the ground. She sat up and took his head. "What is it?" She asked. "Why now? What's going on?"

Ben closed his eyes, breathing heavily. "I'm okay." He mumbled, closing his eyes.

"You're so clearly not it's horrible." Mal protested. "Talk to me. Really. What's going on?"

Ben kept his eyes closed, leaning into her touch. "You're electric." He whispered. "I just… want
more of you."

Mal wrinkled her nose at him as he pulled out of her grasp and stood up, turning away. "Just…
don't worry about it. I'm a grown man. I'm not going to go crazy." He chuckled and ran his hands
through his hair. "I'm sorry about kissing you like that. I wanted to-"

"Don't be," Mal mumbled. Ben nodded and turned to walk away. He didn't even make it around the
couch. "Ben, what do you really mean? Are you talking about time or…" She stumbled off on the
end of her own sentence.

Ben shook his head. "No." He sighed, resting a hand on the back of the couch. "No, no. Mal,
I want you. I mean…" He couldn't get the words out.

"You want to lie with me," Mal mumbled. Her skin felt like ice as she twisted her hands. "That's it,
isn't it?"

"Yeah." He admitted, letting his shoulders slump a little. Ben exhaled and turned back towards her,
bracing his hands on the couch. He seemed to be debating what to say. "Where do you think we
are?" He asked finally, as Mal felt goosebumps arise on her skin. "As a couple. What do you
think?"

"Ben, I am not ready to answer that question." Mal gasped. "I – you – my – I can't."

Ben nodded. "Of course." He agreed. "I mean, after everything and this horrible situation, of
course. Not to mention Chad and Audrey. It's way, way too much pressure."

"I feel like I'm dating you, not like I'm married to you," Mal admitted. "I'm surviving entirely short
term because anything long term about this scares me." She waved her finger between him and her.
Ben nodded along to her words. "I mean, there's a difference between falling asleep with you when
there's still a foot or two of space separating us and sleeping with you, and that's just a line that I
don't want to cross."

"I don't expect you to." Ben nodded. "And listen, this doesn't have to change us. I'm not going to
move on you at all." He exhaled and made to turn around before he paused and turned back around.
"If the curse is never broken, though, one day we'll have to make a decision."

Mal's veins filled with ice. "I understand." She told him and reached for the remote. She twisted it
around in her hands as he hovered anxiously above her. Ben kissed her cheek quickly, leaving a
warm mark on her cool skin. He started to leave the room. "Twist the handle up instead of down!"
Mal warned. "Ericka triggered her next prank on the lock." She heard the door open and he slipped
back out without a word or a sound. Almost all of the servants had been caught up in the war, but
Mal and Ben had remained almost completely unscathed.

Mal swallowed, feeling a little sick as she started the movie and curled into the couch a little bit.
The sun was setting outside. He'd have to come back in soon. Looked like her alone time was
almost over.

If no change occurred on the spell, she'd stay with Ben. She'd end up sleeping with him. They'd
have children together, and she'd have to stick around to raise them even if the spell was broken
after that. Permanent. Mal tried to imagine what that would look like. One or two children in
preppy Auradon clothes, maybe with her hair and maybe not, probably behaving exactly like him,
future heirs to the kingdoms and grandchildren of Maleficent. She tried to imagine Ben touching
her, feeling them inside her, and trying to raise them beside him, and while the idea wasn't bizarre
or repulsive, she immediately put a bright red mental stamp reading "No" on the pictures.
Mal continued watching Maleficent onscreen and curled the blanket tightly around her chin with her box of strawberries crooked under her arm. She couldn't afford to let this take hold in her life. She had kingdoms she needed to rule and worrying about a future out of her hands wouldn't change anything about it.

Mal dropped her palm down in front of Ericka and placed the bucket of worms beside her on the desk. Ericka slumped back in surprise. "How?" She exclaimed. "I hid it so well!"

Mal shrugged. She'd hid it well, true, but Mal was so hot on the twenty-two-year-old's heels that there wasn't much Ericka could do that Mal couldn't sniff out. "Hey, Ericka?" She asked.

Ericka glanced up with a frown at Mal and Mal noticed green on her fingertips. She reached for Ericka's hand and hummed. "I'll make sure to warn Ben about his shampoo then." She told her.

Ericka's mouth dropped open as Mal set her hand back down. "Let's get you out of the palace," Mal suggested.

"The Isle of the Lost?" Ericka asked.

"Yeah," Mal confirmed. She drummed her fingers on the desk that Ericka was sitting behind.

Ericka stared. "Sure." She finally said. "Let's make it a party." She moved the worms aside a few inches with a sigh and then stood up. She followed Mal out behind the bookcases in the library, where she liked to hide and scheme, and they began to head to the doors. Belle was lying on the couch where Mal had blown up the glitter can and focusing intently on a book. As they passed, Mal gave her mother-in-law a quick hug around the shoulders. "Bye, Belle." She whispered as she withdrew.

"Bye, sweetie," Belle said distractedly. She patted Mal's hand as she focused on her book. "Be safe." Mal's cheeks felt warm as she withdrew and headed to the door.

"So, what's your secret?" Ericka complained as they hiked through the corridors to the entrance hall. "I'm literally almost out of tricks. You always seem to see things coming. Is it some sort of magic spell?"

Mal laughed. "I've never had anyone ask me that." She explained. "No, it's not. You just have a very distinct train of thought that I picked up on rather quickly. I can watch what things you notice and then deduce what pranks are coming and when. Among other tricks."

"Tricks that you're not going to tell me?" Ericka asked glumly.

"And give you tips to take me down?" Mal laughed. She opened the front doors and Ericka slipped out with a sigh. Mal followed her out.

Ben was sitting out on the porch steps when they ventured outside. He turned to smile at them when he heard the door open. Mal brushed her hair out of her eyes and exhaled a little bit. At his feet was a large tablet and several papers. "Hey." He greeted them, keeping his eyes on her face as she walked up.

"You doing work outside?" Mal asked as she nudged one of the papers and craned her neck. Her smile quickly faded. "Oh, I see." She nodded sympathetically. On the screen was Audrey's social media profile.

Ben chuckled and moved the tablet aside. "Yeah. I guess dealing with a real piece-of-work constitutes as working, right?" He sighed. "I wrote a letter in an email to both Aurora and Phillip."
Aurora's flat-out embarrassed, but Audrey won't back down. She said: 'until you can provide proof against my statements, I retract nothing.'

Mal rolled her eyes. "We could just share how she was acting last February. Two can play at the shame-game." She replied as she crossed her arms and leveled her gaze at the driveway, where Stewart was waiting for them.

Ben gave Mal a stern look. "No, we won't. You know better." He reprimanded.

Mal scoffed and kicked Ben's shoe lightly as she took a few steps down. "What are you, my mother?" She asked.

Ben rolled his eyes and stiffened his back. "Here, let me try…" He cleared his throat. "Mal, before the sixteenth hour fades on this bright day-" He began in a dark, over-boding tone.

"Shut up." Mal rolled her eyes with a smile. It was sort of endearing, but overall weird to see him try to mimic Maleficent. "And I'll be back around seven, not four, sorry." She leaned down to ruffle his hair and started to walk to where Stewart was waiting to escort her to the Auradon bay

"Wait!" Ben whined as he got to his feet. Mal paused and set her hip at a sarcastic angle as he quickly got to his feet. He stepped toward her and bent down to steal a quick kiss. Mal obliged him for a few seconds and then backed away half-a-step with a smirk. "What?" Ben asked with a raised eyebrow at her expression, breathless.

"Nothing." She responded, reaching up and brushing his shoulders off as if there was some sort of imaginary dust stuck to them. He looked pretty cute with the sunlight hitting him like that.
"Someone just had eggs for breakfast." She smiled before she tapped him on the nose and began to walk away.

"See you tonight!" He called from behind her.

"Bye honey!" She teased, turning and fluttering her fingers at him. She heard him chuckle as he sat back down and figured he was blushing a little. She let out a little breath. Nothing had changed. It was just her and Ben. He may be feeling a little intense on her, but that was okay because she trusted him to hold off. They were still on the same page with each other.

Elsa had been in the gardens with Jessie. As Ericka and Mal made it to the car and Stewart opened the door, she appeared. Ericka waved at her mom. "Mal's taking me to the Isle." She explained. "I'll be back around seven."

At the mention of the Isle, Elsa looked a bit disproving. Her eyes skimmed Mal, however, and she nodded. "Be safe." Elsa cautioned with a frown. "I love you."

Ericka rolled her eyes a little. "I love you too, mom." She said quickly before she ducked into the car.

Mal couldn't understand how Ericka could be so nonchalant about her mother's love, but she supposed it must be different to have grown up with that kind of support. Still, Ericka should realize that her mom wouldn't always be there to back her up. She shrugged it off as she climbed inside the limo and took a seat near the driver's separating window, so she could bug Stewart. Ericka climbed in and sat opposite her.

To be honest, the limo kind of brought back bad memories. Of course, this time Stewart would listen to her if she decided to stop or anything, but it still was a little uncomfortable to relive all the bad memories she'd pushed to the back of her head. Mal rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans.
"So, how long is the drive?" Ericka asked, reaching to raid the limo's supply of candy.

"Two-hour trip," Mal replied sympathetically. "We'll get there around ten. I have a DVD player and some movies if you want to watch with me?"

"Sure." Ericka shrugged. Mal handed the DVD sleeve to Ericka as the car began to move. Immediately, Ice spread out on the cover. Ericka sighed and waved it a little to get it to start to thaw as the climate retreated into her skin. When it was gone, Ericka opened it to reveal rows and rows of compact, plastic colored discs. "Do you have my mom's movie?" Ericka asked as she began to shuffle through the different varieties.

"I do, actually. I'm hoping to catch up." Mal chuckled. She bit her lip and asked: "Does your dad's magic ever act up like that?"

Ericka wrinkled her nose. "We don't talk about my dad." She reminded Mal and hummed. "Mom's movie is cool. She becomes queen and doesn't have a love interest. They're going to do a sequel on the time she left Arendelle too here pretty quick. It'll be awesome - she already showed me this wicked clip of her trying to rush against an ocean. Also, you figure out exactly how powerful she can be when she tries. My favorite princess is Pocahontas, and after her, Mulan."

"Any particular reason?" Mal asked, skimming the visible discs to see if she could spot either of the two names.

"Pocahontas nearly had her head smashed in and Mulan almost died, but they both pulled through because they're that awesome." Ericka nodded. "Want to watch Frozen there and Pocahontas back?"

"Sounds lovely." Mal agreed as Ericka picked up the disc player. She unrolled the dividing window between Stewart and them and leaned on the window frame to smile at him in the rearview mirror. "Well, this is familiar, isn't it?" She asked.

Stewart laughed at her. "Oh yes, a situation in reverse, for sure."

Mal turned to gesture to Ericka. "Ericka, this is Stewart, Stewart, this is Ericka. Ericka, Stewart is the man who brought me to Auradon before he walked me down the aisle and consequently start dating my best friend. Stewart, Ericka is a visiting princess who's accompanying me to the Isle, believe it or not."

Stewart pushed his shades down on his nose to wave at Ericka in the backseat. "Good morning."

"Morning." Ericka yawned. "So, what's the plan for today?"

"Well," Stewart started as he put his right turn signal on. "Normally, we would use the barrier activator to summon the magical bridge to the Isle, but that happens to take us straight into villain territory. So, instead, you'll be taking a boat directly to the construction zone. Then, I'll be here when you get back."

"What are you going to do while we're gone?" Mal asked, half watching Ericka mess with the player and half watching Stewart maneuver traffic.

"Send kissing emoji's to my girlfriend while I watch videos on your movie player," Stewart replied with a smile. "What else would I do?"

Mal laughed. Stewart turned onto a busy road and announced: "I'm going to roll up the window
now, so I can focus on driving."

"Okay." Mal nodded. "Talk to you later." She waved. Stewart gave her a lazy salute as he pushed his sunglasses back into place and reached for the button to roll the window up above his head. Then she leaned into the chair and examined the screen tactfully as the movie ads finished playing.

"So, what exactly are we doing today?" Ericka asked, setting the screen down in her lap.

Mal drummed her fingers on her knee. "Actually... I need to pay a visit to the unfinished portion of the Isle. Just briefly, though." She glanced at Ericka to gauge her reaction.

Ericka examined Mal and then rolled her eyes. "Okay, whatever you decide." She hummed.

Construction had turned out better than Mal could have ever imagined.

Large white concrete walls had been erected with curved edges to keep out intruders who thought they could climb the structure, even though the new barrier blocked them out anyways. They were tall, so nothing could be launched over them, and thick enough to be walked upon. They sheltered a gigantic expanse of an area with woods where there were no inhabitants save small birds and woodland creatures, a small rocky expanse with a newly purified water spring, and a long beach stretching down by the coast, which had since been purified by Auradon rescue workers and the Moorish plants as well. Large areas of soils and plants remained damaged, but when Mal brought Moorish citizens over next month, all should be fixed. A small area had been cleared in the center of all the buildings; this and a road paved with grey, brown, and white stones. Three types of white buildings with no outside paint and minimal inside furnishings were set on either side of the streets. There were large, tall apartment buildings and small, modern houses for families to reside in aside from a number of places for small businesses to begin. Nine streets, Forty dwellings of different sizes and shapes, and nine business locations. Twelve high-density housing complexes rose up into the sky. Everything was white, unpainted, and undecorated. Mal hoped once people came to live here, they'd spruce things up individually.

Ericka followed her around, teasing people and telling jokes, but when Mal went to meet the construction team, her partner went silent. A large part of the crew was originally from Auradon, but a great part nonetheless was obviously Isle. They were dirtier than the normal crew, with dark eyes that naturally shied away from light and a slightly foul odor. When they saw Mal, their faces lit up in wonder and worry. A couple of familiar faces poked out at her, but none of them were her friends.

"Hello." Mal started. "How is everyone today?"

Silence, though everyone shifted their feet and nodded pleasantly. Mal shrugged. "That's fine. I want to thank you each personally for helping out here and explain what I'm planning to do. I don't want to have any secrets between us." Mal pulled her tablet out of her bag. "I've already arranged to have you paid for what you worked per hour. If you're Auradonian, you'll be paid in Auradon dollars. If you're Isle, it's a little more complex, because I'm planning on starting a new currency." Mal produced a card from her pocket. It was purple, with her name in raised digits on the side and two nicks in the side, a triangle and a square. "I decided it's a bit much to expect villains to not raid and pillage each other in this new utopia, so this will prevent your currency being stolen because I'm going to use magic to tie your card to you personally. If stolen, it'll reappear. Only you can use it. It'll be on record with my government systems that you have a card, and you will have to pay a yearly tax for the first few years until the Isle is self-sufficient and a card becomes an automatic right. Having one gives you the opportunity to live here in this city I asked you to build, gives you
the right to vote and make improvement suggestions to me, and makes it so you can recover property in the event it is stolen. If you choose to have one, I'll also allow you an apartment in the city, but you will have to pick a profession. You can't pick an apartment and live off of stealing anymore. This is an opportunity for the Isle to heal, not become lazy." Mal tucked her card away in her pocket. "Of course, if you decide to not receive a card, you'll be paid in standard Isle currency. Does that make sense?"

The Auradonians had tuned most of her explanation out, but the Isle workers looked at her with soft expressions. Finally, someone spoke up in the back. "What about the rest of the Isle?" They asked.

"They'll have the opportunity to choose too." Mal nodded. "I'm just giving you time to think for a while on what you want. I don't have the cards for everyone yet, but you can expect them around the end of June if you want them." Mal pulled her notebook out and set it on the table. "If you already know what you want, you can scribble your name down with your decision for the new or old currency. And, if I may, construction isn't going to stop here. Once more people are in the city, they'll be free to use their cards to buy new plots of land and build their own houses. There'll be houses, businesses, and entire towns where stealing and crime is almost impossible because we'll know where everything comes from and where it goes."

One boy with a long scar across his nose raised a shaky hand. "Will we be able to go back and forth between the wall and the rest of the Isle?" He asked.

Mal bit her lip. She'd known this was coming. "Technically… yes. Your card can't be stolen, and you can't enter the city without a card. You're free to go back out and in at your leisure. But… the Isle has always been particularly bloodthirsty. I cannot be responsible for your well-being at this time if you choose to go back and forth. Eventually, we will have protection and a legal system that all will bend too, even those on the rough part of the Isle."

"Won't this eliminate the entire purpose of the Isle?" Ericka asked as she sat near Mal. "I mean, Auradon sent the villains here as punishment."

"The villains will stay put," Mal said. "This is mostly for those who never had a choice. Those who did or those who still hold onto evil intentions will remain. However, they will have to abide by rules, or I will become…” She chose her words carefully. "Fiercer."

"Fiercer?" Ericka asked.

Mal sighed. "There are certain crimes, like murder, that once we have our justice system up, I will not hesitate to assign a death sentence to." A stunned silence fell over the room. The death threat had never been used; not even when Auradon was sending people here. The Isle kids exchanged looks.

Mal exhaled. "Being from the Isle doesn't have to be bad. This is our chance to prove we're not the forgotten bygones of Auradon's glory days. We're hard workers. We're thrifty and clever. Give it a few years and I'll change people's entire lives. There'll be schools, there'll be houses. People will be able to feel the sun and explore hobbies and passions. Growing up it was unlucky to be born here, and what I want to do is I want to make people feel like it's good to be unlucky because now, for the first time, we have our shots at happy endings." She looked around the room at her proteges. Most of them were in their early to late teens, some even older than Mal. They had families and friends outside, but it was clear Mal's words were appealing. She was promising both safety and change.

A young boy stood up on thin legs and hobbled carefully to where Mal had put her notepad down.
Mal moved out of the way and resisted the urge to look over his shoulder as he wrote. When he left again to sit down, Mal dared to glance at what he'd written. York Tyler, 15, card, profession to be decided. Mal let out a breath. More people stood up. Not everyone chose a card, and some people were clearly indecisive, but they had time to decide. The architect had given Mal a list of everyone's names, so she knew who she needed to pay. Those who didn't want to take her offer yet would leave when the Auradon construction crews left – the barrier would ensure it.

A supply boat had brought sandwiches and punch for a finishing celebration. Mal and Ericka stood nearby as all the workers lined up first for a sandwich and then some drink. Wherever Mal noticed young teens wrapping up their sandwiches for later, she took an extra to them. Ericka sat down beside the architect and listened to his stories of all the things that had happened in the last few months. Her eyes were bright, and she was entranced by the stories. "Not much happens in the palace." She told Mal. "I'd much rather be out in the open. Everyone thinks I'm irresponsible because I don't like paperwork, but I'd just really like to run around and be around people, you know?"

As one-thirty struck, people began to leave for the outside Isle once again. A magic gateway kept careful track of the workers who were still allowed to go back and forth.

"What now?" Ericka asked as Mal pulled out a jacket from her bag. It was her old Isle garb, a little tight around the chest and biceps now, but still as threatening as ever. Long Live Evil was sewn by Evie's careful hands into the back, and the layered zippers made for an asymmetrical work of art.

Mal picked some dirt off the ground and brushed it into her long, smooth hair without saying a word. Ericka stared. "You're kidding, right?" She deadpanned.

"You can stay here, or you can come with me." Mal offered, rubbing a little above her eye. "If you come with me, you'll have to be a bit undercover."

Ericka retained an emotionless expression as Mal carefully ruined her hair and makeup before she looked at Ericka for approval.

"Okay." Ericka sighed. "Can you help me out?"

"Gladly," Mal said. She used a little bit of magic to change Ericka's light-blue dress into dark leather and used a little more to give her ripped fishnet leggings before she and Ericka carefully dismantled her Mom's traditional braid. They used more dirt to shade her eyes and finally took a few minutes to laugh at themselves.

Mal was surprised by how comfortable she felt in her old Isle garb. It was a little tighter than she remembered, but she could still pull it off like it was as simple as a new look instead of a new personality. It occurred to her that maybe she hadn't left all of her Isle behind when she'd started to adopt Auradon.

They snuck out behind the last of the Isle kids. Upon smelling the outside Isle air for the first time, Ericka began to cough. Mal wrinkled her nose, but it was familiar to her. Spoiled milk, old socks, pollution. She pressed onward. Through the dismal forest, across the bridge where Mal had hidden after her mother revealed her plan, and into the city. They reached the old streets where Mal used to run and strayed around the crumbling buildings. Mal led Ericka through the streets on a quick goose chase before they paused for breath in a clear alleyway. Around them were several metal fences and a sign reading: 'Beware of flying rocks'.

As Ericka wheezed and tried to catch her breath, Mal picked up a rock. She twisted it around and around in her palm.
It was a Thursday, around two o'clock in the afternoon. No one would be in the hideaway unless they were skipping school. If they weren't, Mal could leave her presents and her friends wouldn't know until much later. If they were there... they could betray her to her mom or they could let her go. Mal wondered what they thought of her after everything that had happened. She bit her lip as tears filled her eyes. She tried to imagine what they'd say, but nothing came to mind.

She tossed the rock at the sign, and the hidden doorway swung up. Ericka raised an eyebrow as Mal turned and invited her up. The girls stalked up into the upper rooms. Mal waited for half-a-second at the door to compose herself and then opened it. Cold air and paint fumes rushed out, but not a sound escaped. Mal looked around the edge of the door. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw a familiar face with long hair and a sleeveless vest, but it was just the mural of Jay staring into her soul.

Their hideout was empty. The murals that Mal had created so many years ago were still up, though Mal noticed that one wall had been... disfigured. She frowned and stepped closer as Ericka left her side and began to explore. Photos of her in Auradon had been posted everywhere on it. And among them, many were of Ben. Her wedding day... her recent event at Auradon Accelerated... and even some photos she had taken of herself and shared on the interweb. Mal put a hand over her mouth. All of the pictures of Ben had been disfigured. Some showed him with red horns and black eyes, and others his head had been disconnected from his body by tearing meticulously at his neck. One had a giant 'x' across his face. A dartboard that she'd always imagined was Uma's face had a picture of Ben taped to it and had been slashed at so badly Ben's right eye was missing. Mal felt goosebumps creep onto her skin. "Oh my." She whispered.

"What is it?" Ericka asked, turning and examining the wall. Her mouth dropped open. "Is that... Ben?" She exclaimed, stepping over Evie's sewing machine and walking towards the dartboard.

"They've got everything wrong." Mal gasped. "Oh no. They hate him and they don't even know him."

"Why would they hate Ben?" Ericka asked. "He's awesome. Doesn't have a bad bone in his body."

'They think I'm trapped'. Mal deduced. 'They see him as having kidnapped me.' She exhaled. "I don't know." She lied to Ericka. "They probably just... miss seeing me?" She shook her head, and Ericka nodded and wandered back to where she'd been.

"These are amazing," Ericka stated as she examined the murals, ignoring the anti-Ben wall. Mal could scarcely rip her eyes away from their doodles of Ben with 'x's for eyes and missing limbs.

"Thanks," Mal exhaled as she took her presents and placed them on each of her friend's beds, glancing cautiously at the wall. "I wonder if I could do better now." She fiddled with her last gift, a letter, and put it carefully on Jay's bed. Jay was her oldest friend. He deserved the contact the most. Mal closed her eyes for a moment and imagined him reading it. 'Come to the city,' it read. 'Come see me. I have so much to tell you about. You'll never believe how kind and fair the palace has been. Ben especially is so supportive of everything I want to do and be. You'd like him a lot, Jay. Maybe he'd actually be a decent partner for you in swords.'

Mal hoped her friends got the message that she didn't want Ben murdered. On the contrary, really.

"You did these?" Ericka asked in awe.

"Yeah." Mal nodded and turned to look at the giant portrait of herself. She looked so... young. She pulled out her phone and took some photos of her old work. It was interesting to her. Maybe she'd show Ben. As she checked the photos, she thought she saw a movement underneath Carlos's bed.
She jumped and whirled around, but there was nothing there. Carefully, Mal got to her feet and peered underneath the mattress. There wasn't any dust - Evie made sure of that, and only a few twisted pieces of electronics were there. The ceiling above creaked and made her flinch, but as far as she knew there wasn't any way into the walls.

There was a loud crash outside that sounded like it was a few streets away. Someone screamed in the distance, and Ericka flinched. She stared at Mal with wide eyes. Mal winced. "Common occurrence." She assured Ericka. "Hopefully it doesn't happen anymore in a few months. I'd go check it out if I were on my own, but I need to get you home safely to your mom."

Ericka nodded. Mal sighed. "Let's get back. Ready to go?"

Ericka walked out the door without an answer, so Mal chuckled and followed her.

As they came out onto the street level, a street urchin with patches on his elbows and knees rushed past. Ericka jumped back like she'd seen a ghost when she saw the gigantic scab that covered half his face. Mal set a hand on her shoulder. "Walk." She commanded. Ericka did so, and they quickly headed back to the utopian area.

Up in the room, a figure in red, black, and white fell down from the ceiling with a huff, clutching his chest like he'd seen a ghost. He dashed to the window and peered out cautiously. There was no sign of purple on the streets down below, but he couldn't deny what he'd just seen. Not when the proof was still sitting out on their beds. That had been Mal. That had been Mal out of the palace. She'd had an escort, a blonde girl, but she'd been mostly alone. And she had been shocked by their wall. She said they had it all wrong…

Carlos slumped against the wall, gasping for breath a little. He couldn't believe that had happened. Right in front of his eyes too. He also couldn't believe she hadn't caught him when he'd dropped that knick-knack underneath his bed from the ceiling, where he'd jumped when he heard the grate slide open since he'd wanted to surprise any intruders.

His head was spinning as he stared at her offerings. Were there any double-meanings there? Or was it possible that all that time, they really had been wrong?

No, not a chance.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Mal has an interview. She calls Elsa regarding the fallen Island. Mal realizes she has fallen in love.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mal chose to have her interview in the library where Ben had had his a few months ago, before they'd gotten married. The reporters and camera crew showed up at two in the afternoon, after Elsa and her family had left in the morning, but at two-ten, Mal was hiding in her old room staring at her reflection.

Sophia had given her a black dress to wear with her now-dirty Isle jacket, but her hair seemed too long to go with the ensemble. Mal examined it with a frown. A pair of scissors and a collection of hair ties sat on the table in front of her. Mal carefully picked up the largest, black hair tie and gathered all her hair up at the nape of her neck. She tied it with a few inches beneath her scalp and managed to wrap the tie a whopping six times around.

Carefully, she used smaller hair ties all the way down to where her hair ended around her thighs to keep the strands in line.

Finally, she picked up the scissors and held them in front of the highest tie as she examined herself in the mirror. "Goodbye long hair." She thought as she began to cut.

It took a little grinding and moving her hair around in its ponytail, but at long last, about four feet of hair fell from her head into a rope on the floor. Using a comb and the mirror, Mal evened out her new haircut. It looked similar to when she'd first come to Auradon, a little longer in front, a little shorter in back, only hanging about four inches in the longest places. She ruffled the top up a little and swished her head around. Her head felt lighter. She picked up her rope of purple hair off the ground and found it to be heavy.

She knew there were places in Auradon and on the Isle where you could donate hair to be made into wigs and figured someone somewhere would be able to use it, so she curled it up and resolved to find a place after her interview. She cleaned off the scissors in the sink and shook her head in the mirror once more, admiring the way the uneven, freshly cut edges felt on her skin.

She went up to her bedroom and found her jacket hanging on the back of a chair. She put it on, flipping her now-short hair out of the collar as she did so.

The door opened. She heard footsteps but didn't turn around as she fixed the cuffs on her sleeves. When she heard someone chuckle, she turned around. "What?" She asked as Sophia walked over.

"That's quite the improvement." Sophia laughed, tracing her own black, braided hair as she examined Mal's. "It's not straight, though."

Mal shrugged. "It wasn't meant to be." She pulled the rolled-up hair out of her pocket to show
Sophia with a smirk.

Sophia looked impressed. "How long until the fairies grow it all back?" She asked with a laugh. Mal could only groan in response.

"Everyone's been looking for you," Sophia mentioned as she adjusted Mal's sleeves, which was her way of telling Mal it was time to head down.

"Why?" Mal asked. "I told them we were doing it in the library. They don't need me to set up everything."

Sophia put a hand on her arm with a smile. "No, but they wanted to make sure you were ready to be onscreen."

"Am now." Mal shook her head again to feel the cut locks tickle her neck.

"Feel weird?" Sophia asked as she watched her.

"Very," Mal confirmed. As they walked towards the door, it opened even wider and a head of sandy hair appeared.

"Mal?" Ben asked, poking his head inside. "Oh, hello. You found her, Sophia." He noticed Mal's hair and smiled. "Oh, I see." He hummed, nodding in understanding.

Mal cocked her head. "You're not going to ask any questions?" She asked.

Ben laughed and shook his head. "Nah. I knew it was coming." He retorted as he opened the door for them and let them slip through. The three began to head down to the library. Ben put an arm around Mal's shoulder and then began to thread his fingers through the hair at the back of her neck. She shivered.

"Wow." He commented. "This feels weird."

"I know." Mal agreed. "It feels almost rough when it's first cut." She shook her head again. She hadn't even realized how heavy her hair had been getting.

"Yeah." Ben agreed.

Inside the library, camera crews were rushing to and fro. Everything was already set up even though the interview wouldn't start until three. When the production manager saw her, she threw her arms up into the air. "Goodness gracious!" She exclaimed. "There you are!" Then, her eyes zeroed in on Mal's hair. "You cut your hair!" She shrieked. Everyone in the area turned to see. It was as if someone had turned the dial on Mal's isle sarcasm all the way up. She fingered her hair, and then looked up with a smirk. "Huh. I didn't notice." She drawled. "I wonder who did that."

"It's not even straight." The productions manager despaired. "Do any of the makeup artists have a pair of scissors on them?" She asked as she hurried over and began to fret.

"Thanks for noticing." Mal interrupted. "Anyway, everything's fine, don't worry. Anyone have the time?"

"Two-forty." Said Adam as he appeared from behind them. He examined Mal. "You look like when you first came here in that jacket." He said.

Mal nodded thoughtfully. "I thought so too. Crazy how long it's been, right?" She examined the set
around them and was pleased to note she wasn't as nervous as she thought she'd be.

"Very." Adam nodded. "Well, go ahead and sit down then."

"Wait." Ben turned her around by the shoulders and threaded his fingers through her newly-chopped locks. Mal put her arms around his neck and pulled him down so that their lips touched, and then pushed him away playfully.

"Bye now." She waved. Ben rolled his eyes and waved as she quickly wove through the crews and made her way to where the interviewer sat in a stuffed armchair, anxiously tapping his leg and shuffling through fistful of flashcards. Beside him was a matching armchair separated by a small table.

"Hello," Mal greeted as she sat down. She stuck out a hand to the interviewer. He was a tall, balding man with hazel eyes. He had a long neck, a round nose, and large eyes. "I'm Mal, and you are?" She asked.

The interviewer relaxed and took her hand. "My name is Elias. It's nice to meet you, your highness."

Mal laughed. "Oh, I'm not really a highness. I mean, look how tall I am. But you can call me Mal. Are you asking me questions today?" She leaned back into her chair with her knees apart a little.

"I am." Elias nodded.

"You look pretty nervous. Anything I can help out with?" Mal asked.

Elias let out a little breath. "I am a little nervous. I don't usually interview the royals, but our other reporter is on vacation. Say," He paused. "Want to do a few practice runs? Just before the interview starts?"

"Sure." Mal nodded. "Maybe you can explain to me a little how this is supposed to go as we go. I've only ever watched Ben do this."

"Okay." Elias straightened up and put his cards on the table in between them. "So, first the man in black over there will count us in." He pointed at a figure dressed all in black with glasses and a microphone taped to his chin. "Right now, the channel is finishing up other shows, but soon they'll switch to a commercial break, and then we'll start our interview. They'll play a little jingle, and Jillian, who is the lady in the slacks with the red blouse, will announce where we are and that I'm about to interview you. Then we start."

"Got it." Mal nodded.

"Ten minutes to airtime." Someone called across the room. Elias sucked in a breath.

Mal reached over and patted his forearm. "Hey, chill out. Everything's going to be fine."

Elias smiled. "Thank you." He unclutched his white knuckles and glanced at his cards on the side table. "Okay, the first question I have is more of an icebreaker. How's life in the palace been lately?"

"Busy." Mal nodded, keeping her eyes on him like she was actually on camera. "Queen Elsa, who is like, my new best friend, just left to go home. It's been really nice to have a magical queen around who I can take pointers from."
Elias nodded, examining her carefully. "Usually," He paused. "well, the royals tend to have this pattern of avoiding the questions to steer the interview the direction they want. We reporters hate it."

"I know." Mal nodded. "Ben did it in his interview last August."

Elias nodded. "I just want you to know that if you're intending on following that pattern, you might not want to mention anything about magic, because I can immediately jump on that."

Even though it was advice, Mal felt an underlying sense of sarcasm. She tilted her head. This poor man didn't even know how much he was about to bite off. "Go ahead." Mal urged. Elias stared. He looked for a second like he was going cross-eyed as he tried to decipher the meaning behind her sudden words. Mal got the feeling he'd never been invited to invade, despite being a reporter. "Be a shark." She teased.

Elias set his jaw and squared his shoulders. Mal did the same, which made him laugh. "Were you and Elsa practicing magic inside the palace while she was here?" He asked.

Mal laughed. "I conjured a flower for Jessie, but that's it. I'm not very good at conjuring. She conjured a snowflake, and I think Ericka sneezed and caused a snowstorm, but that was about all the magic activity that happened while she was here. I'm going to be doing more on the Isle these next few weeks than I ever have at the castle."

"You say you've done magic before at the castle?" Elias asked. Mal studied his expression. He did not seem angry, or fearful. Only determined. Mal smirked.

"Yes, actually. I blew up a can of glitter when Ben tried to wrestle it away from me, and I tried to be lazy and clean his dad's office with magic and ended up throwing twenty-years' worth of dust into the air and blowing all the lightbulbs out in the room." She announced. A nearby reporter gave her a cautious look.

"I find it very interesting how you describe yourself using magic." Elias probed. "Compared to your mother, you seem to use it as a practical joke or a shortcut. Not a bad thing at all."

"Exactly right." Mal nodded. "I don't actually share a lot of similarities with my mom. Except for my eyes. And maybe my skin color." Mal examined her skin playfully.

"No horns or anything?" Elias teased.

"I actually do have horns." Mal smiled, putting her hands down.

Elias's composure broke. "No way." He said skeptically. "I think you're playing me."

"I do too!" Mal insisted.

"No." Elias shook his head. "I am looking at your head, and I can see quite clearly you do not have horns." He examined her hairline.

"It was a surprise for me too," Mal patted his arm as she pretended to be sympathetic.

Elias stared at her, looking for evidence to call her bluff. "You seriously have horns?" He asked.

Mal bent forward and pulled her hair flat before she felt the top of her head shift a little. Someone yelled in the room, and it went deathly silent as Mal sat up.
Everyone had gone silent and was staring at her, but Elias was glaring. "For real?" He complained. "You seriously have horns?"

"I told you I did!" Mal rolled her eyes. She shook her head and they disappeared back into her skull. "I have wings too." She added, taking up an overall relaxed pose.

Elias turned away in falsified disgust. "I am not calling that bluff." He spotted Ben across the room, who was tense and staring at Mal in a quiet panic. "King Ben!" He called, standing up. "Does she have wings?"

After several seconds of Ben shifting his weight and everyone's eyes on him, he nodded. Elias picked up his cards off the table and threw them to the ground. "Screw this interview!" He declared, pointing a judging finger at her. "You're a dirty trickster!"

Mal laughed. "Quitting already?" She teased.

Elias sat back down. "Heck no." He said. "But that's the last time I try and play the queen for a fool."

The tension in the room was fading fast. Ben looked incredibly tense, but Mal had a feeling he'd be fine. Meanwhile, Adam was pulling him aside with a lot of tense whispers. It occurred to her that Adam hadn't known about the horns. Or the wings.

Elias took a deep breath. "Let's not put that in the interview." He decided. "I'm going to steer away from horns and..." He waved his hand tiredly.

"Things with wings?" Mal supplied. This only made Elias glare harder. Mal could hardly contain her laughter.

"Let's go back." Elias said, quickly recomposing himself. "You mentioned that you're going to be doing magic on the Isle."

"Yes." Mal agreed. "New citizens in the utopian city will be registered with me. I'm not going to do the whole thing with fake identities and stealing and gangs. If you're in that city, you'll need a card to go back and forth. The cards will be magically encoded to you, so they can't be stolen, lost, or used by someone else. When new children start to be born, they'll get new cards. By the end of this month, builders will leave the area and return to Auradon. From then on, you must have an active card in order to be in the area, even if you're visiting from Auradon. The airspace will still be restricted, but less restricted than before. Magic will be allowed because we're going to need it. Isle citizens who choose to live there have to agree to my terms before I give them a card. I've made it very clear, especially in the case of previous villains such as Gaston, Claude Frollo, and my mother Maleficent, that I am not above a death penalty if you think you can evade my laws on this."

"You sound like you have things figured out, but how will your utopia become self-sufficient?" Elias asked.

"Each new person coming into the city over Auradon age of consent has to pick a profession, even if it's temporary. I know there are many people on the Isle who truly want a better lifestyle. I will assist in opening up opportunities for schooling, food production, and even an advisory council for myself, and they will be expected to actively search for opportunities for growth." Mal explained calmly. "If they think they can get away with being lazy and living off charity, I will send them back to the villain's part of the Isle until they are ready for the privilege."

"Thirty seconds to air." The man in black called. Everyone sent up the call.
Mal stuck out her hand. "Great practice." She congratulated.

Elias smiled and shook her hand. "Thank you for it." He said. "I was honestly worried about interviewing you. You're really nice. Hopefully, we can do this again later."

Mal gave a thumbs-up. "Sounds good. I think you're my new favorite reporter. You honestly thought you could call me out."

Elias groaned. "Not a mistake I'll make again." He mumbled.

Mal laughed. "I'd hope not."

"Live in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1." The man counted down. Mal and Elias quieted down and folded their arms across their chests.

Jillian stepped in front of the camera. "We're live now from the historic Beast's castle, where Queen Mal of Auradon, the Isle, and the Moors, has agreed to an interview. Here on Live TV, please welcome Elias Georgia and Queen Mal."

Elias waved at the camera. "Thank you, Jillian. I'm Elias Georgia, and this beside me is the Queen of Auradon, the Isle, and the Moors, Mal Bertha Benson. Good afternoon, Mal."

Mal's brain short-circuited. "Oh, uhm, good afternoon." She fumbled. There was an awkward pause. "I'm sorry, I'd never actually heard my last name read out loud before and," She whirled around and sought out Ben's eyes in the crowd. "Is our last name really Benson?" She asked. The studio laughed as Ben nodded his head and gave her two thumb's-up. "Oh, okay then." Mal turned around. "Mal Bertha Benson. That's fine, whatever." She said, then mouthed: 'Mal Bertha Benson' to herself. Elias laughed at her. Already, this interview was filled with lots of lessons.

"What a startling revelation." He snorted. "Mal, if you don't mind, we're going to start with some icebreakers."

"I do mind," Mal interrupted very seriously. Elias froze and stared at her before someone on the sound crew played a negative-sounding beep, like he'd lost a round of some sort of game show. Mal burst into laughter. The camera crews laughed along with her, quietly.

"That's mean." Elias told her disapprovingly.

"Sorry, sorry." Mal apologized, waving her hand a little. "Go on, what's your icebreaker?"

"But now it sounds lame," Elias protested with a sigh. "Whatever. How has palace life been lately?"

"Well, it was peaceful until you showed up this afternoon." Mal replied, setting her chin on her hand.

Elias turned and stared into the camera with the most deadpan expression Mal had ever seen. The camera crew started to giggle as Mal pulled her leg up onto her knee and maintained a sweet smile, well aware she was on Live TV.

Before Elias could ask another question, Mal said "We've had Queen Elsa here at the palace. She's kind of like my new best friend at this point. It was super nice to have another magical queen around."

Poor Elias relaxed. For a few minutes, they carefully went down the path they'd rehearsed, until
Elias took an abrupt detour. "You know," he began, leaning down a little and picking up a magazine from where it'd been laid beside his chair. "The kingdom has been alight with all these rumors lately," He held it up in view of the cameras and Mal leaned forward to skim the title. Immediately, she groaned. "Unable to have children?" A headline on the cover read with a picture from her blog underneath it. "Do you know anything about this?" Elias asked, chuckling a little at her reaction as Mal slumped into her chair in disbelief.

"Give me a second. I rolled my eyes so hard I might have given myself brain damage." Mal grumbled. She rubbed her brow line, shaking her head at the article. "I know about it. I think it's stupid."

"So, it's not true?" Elias affirmed, still holding the magazine up for the audience to see.

"If I'm infertile, I have no idea." Mal scoffed. "And there is no physical way you can survive self-mutilation on the Isle of the Lost. It's hard enough to keep alive if anyone else beats you up. There's so much stuff in the air that it's dangerous to even have your skin uncovered, let alone an open wound. I mean, seriously, the air is acidic and burns your skin in the summer when the sun warms the barrier up."

"The air is acidic?" Elias's shoulders slumped in shock, and he set the magazine back down.

"Yeah. You have to be careful to cover yourself up when you sleep because you can get clouds of pollution scattering from place to place." Mal nodded. "But, going back to those stupid rumors, you need to just let them go. We actually know where they come from and everything."

"You do?" Elias asked. From offstage, Ben signaled her to stop talking.

"We do." Mal affirmed. "But I won't tell you. All I'll say is that they're the same person who's had a mental breakdown in our entryway three times and who told me not to expect to stick around for long."

Elias snorted. "Sounds like a personal problem." He laughed. Mal nodded, rolling her eyes and straightening up with her legs splayed. He cleared his throat, fell a little sullen, and turned to her like he was ignoring the cameras and it was meant to be between the two of them. "Tell us more about the Isle." He requested.

"You want to know more of the conditions?" Mal probed. Elias nodded, and Mal felt the cameras zoom in on her face as she thought. Everything felt very… fragile. Mal could feel Ben and Adam's eyes on her. "There's no clean water." She mumbled. "Nothing except for the occasional bottled water Auradon send over, but sometimes you also send filters. Carlos, who was my friend and who was good at building things, filtered water for us and others. He wasn't the only one. The dirt is hard. There are trees and grass, but they grow in bad colors and barely help the air quality. There aren't many animals. I know… there's frogs that mutated fast enough to survive. They have poisons in their skin and most of them have worms in their bellies. Five legs, three eyes, horrible mutations. And the air, in the winter… you'll have things solidify straight from the air onto your skin and it'll freeze onto you. In the summer, that all melts and goes back into the air, and then suddenly there's acid clouds that float around and take forever to dissipate. Nothing edible grows and if you try and eat things off the trees or ground, you'll die, so… you know the trash barges that Auradon sends over? That's what everyone lives off of."

Ben lowered his head, using a hand to shield his eyes from those around him, and Adam turned away. Mal drummed her fingers on her knees. She wondered who'd been the first to come up with that marvelous idea. 'Let's send all the trash to the Isle so that our other trash can use it!'
"There's sinkholes." Mal continued. "And the water down by the docks will kill you if you get it in your mouth. It'll cause infections in your ears and in your eyes and in your nose. It's so thick to swim in that some people just can't ever come back up. Anything made of wood rots from the ground up, and things collapse every other day. Stone and metal lasts longer. Our stronghold was designed by Carlos and built by Jay and I... so we were mostly safe." She exhaled, looking around and shaking her head. "I'm sorry, can we change the subject? I... I don't need to go back there today."

Elias looked very, very pale. He was so stunned Mal didn't even want to look around the room at everyone else's expressions. He made a sound in the back of his throat, and Mal knew he was fumbling for what to say. Mal glanced to the cameras. "I could always talk about Ben." She offered. From across the room, she heard a thump, and glanced over to see Ben had hit his head against the wall.

"But this is about you." Elias protested with a shaky smile appearing on his face. "Not about Ben and his weird anti-sock habits." He cleared his throat and glanced to the side, to his cards. Mal burst into laughter and could feel Ben's glare from yards away. "What, um, what happened at Auradon Accelerated?"

"I discovered my sarcasm is a lot funnier to Auradon than it was to the Isle." Mal grumbled. "If our two countries ever go to war, the Isle will win because Auradon will be too busy laughing at everyone's snarky responses."

Elias raised an eyebrow. "Let's not test that theory." He suggested.

"Agreed." Mal nodded.

"What are your thoughts on the young Prince Charming's restriction from the throne until he's twenty-four?" Elias asked. Mal sighed. The door to the library opened and Lumiere appeared. He skirted behind the interview crew and went to where Ben and Adam were watching her interview. Mal watched as he tapped Ben's shoulder and began to talk urgently to him. Ben nodded, glanced to Mal, and continued to talk. Mal watched as Ben's face contorted into a frown. He began to walk away.

"Mal." Elias started. He drew her attention back to him as Ben left the room.

Mal cleared her head. "Am I supposed to have an opinion? All you need to know is that he was imprudent and offensive. I got my restraining order, so I don't really see a need to comment on it any further."

"A restraining order?" Elias's eyebrows shot upwards.

"He grabbed me." Mal deadpanned. "He grabbed me after saying that anyone would want to slam me and that he'd go down hard on me. Besides spelling him into a lizard, what would you have expected me to do?"

Elias fell silent, again. Mal could see him regretting almost everything that had been said in the last thirty seconds. She exhaled. Hopefully Ben wouldn't condone her for shaming Chad like that. Elias swallowed. "You mentioned two weeks ago, before Elsa arrived, that you have several ideas and plans you hope to share with Auradon. Can you open up on that here, now?"

"Absolutely," Mal said softly. She set her shoulders back and focused on Elias. "As a fore note, it's a little late in the month, so everything I'm talking about here will probably occur when I return for the moors in June, maybe even stretching out to August." Mal folded her hands in her lap. "Ben and
I have decided to invite Auradonians to the Isle for two days in August. People will have the opportunity to see the Isle and the city, and converse with people there. We're going to be administering medical aid to those who need it and helping set up residences and businesses, if we're lucky. There are entire places of people in need of help, and we need to save them. Auradon caused so many problems throwing everyone onto the Isle. Especially since you threw the weaker villains and criminals there over the last twenty years. Many of them have died and been left to rot. Innocent people have been born and grown into adults there. People like…"

Mal was going to say herself, but she abruptly remembered other faces. She paused and looked at her hands. "People like Jay." She said, meeting Elias's eyes. "He was… he was my best friend on the Isle. And his dad is Jafar, and so he runs around, stealing the same things over and over to make his dad happy, knowing Jafar doesn't care about him, and trying not to starve to death in the process. He's Ben's age, and he'll live under his dad's thumb for the rest of his life, just like I lived under my mom."

Mal twisted her fingers together and stared directly into the camera. "How much has Auradon hurt us? You carved out Ursula's eye, Stephan stole my mother's wings from her. Everyone is going insane in a place so polluted people lose their sense of smell and touch. The people there have the capability to be good. The villains made their choice, but would it be right to let their children waste? I have so many plans to make things different. We're talking schools, and jobs, and opportunities to travel and see other places. I don't want happily-ever-after to be an Auradon-only concept anymore. My goal right now is to make opportunity accessible to everyone."

There was silence in the room. Elias sniffled and wiped his eyes. Then he leaned forward on his knees. "Mal," He said. "That was beautiful."

The door opened. Ben walked back in. He looked up and met her eyes. Mal drummed her fingers. "Last question," Elias said as she turned her attention back to him. "What do you have to say on the goodness of the people on the Isle?"

Mal smiled. "They are good. They help each other and form both alliances and friendships. Many of them fall in love. I could name Uma and Harry off the top of my head." She cocked her head as she delved into memory land. "They have the super strong connection… I think they're probably the purest case of true love on the Isle." She sought out Ben in the crowd once again.

Many people in the room sighed. Elias smiled, and let out a breath. "Well," He said. "Thank you so much for that. I can't express how enlightening this all has been. I feel a lot more connected to you and..." He smirked at Mal. "I had no idea you had such a brilliant sense of humor."

Mal raised an eyebrow. He mirrored her, and people around the room chuckled. Elias threw his head back a little and laughed. "Thank you for allowing this interview..." He started, leaning forward and extending his hand.

"Thank you for doing it." She nodded, leaning forward to shake it.

Elias smiled and turned to the cameras, presenting her one last time. "That's all the time we have, unfortunately. Thank you, Auradon, for tuning in."

Mal waved at the camera before the camera crew counted out, and officially ended the interview. Crew members flooded the set to congratulate each other on a great job well done. Mal shook as many hands as she could and was pleased to see many people were comfortable around her. Despite the wings, the horns, they liked who she was.
She shook Adam's hand before she realized who he was. He pulled her into a hug with a laugh.

Ben stood behind her with his hands in his pockets, laughing as people swarmed her. He didn't say anything as the crews began to pack up. Elias shook her hand and thanked her again before everyone began to file out. It took a while, but finally, the library was empty except for her, Ben, and Adam.

"You did well." Adam congratulated her, pulling her under his arms and hugging her again.

"Thanks," Mal laughed. She turned to Ben. "Did something happen?" She asked. "Why were you pulled out?"

Ben shook his head, hiding a smile. "I had an inquiry about something, and Lumiere caught wind of it and pulled me out to question me on it. Nothing to worry about though."

Mal stared. Ben raised his eyebrows underneath his gaze. "You cannot not expect me to ask more questions if that's the kind of explanation you're going to give me." Mal deadpanned.

Ben held up his hands in defeat. "Sorry, but I can't really share at the moment. I promise, though. When you see it, you'll love it."

Mal nodded, scrutinizing Ben. "I'll hold you to that." She warned.

Ben laughed and kissed her head. "I know you will." Abruptly, he picked her up and spun with her in the air. Mal shrieked, hitting his shoulders lightly and squeezing his eyes closed. "Come on!"

Ben cheered. "You did great, and my phone has been buzzing in my pocket for the last five minutes with the news, and we need to go out to celebrate!"

"Okay, okay. Put me down." Mal ordered. He let her down. She met his eyes. His cheeks were flushed and he looked excited.

"Let's go out." He smiled, breathlessly. "You know, like normal couples." He made air quotes around the words.

Mal laughed. "Where's Belle and Sophia and Stewart? Can we take everyone, please?"

"Of course." Ben waved her forward, towards the door. "I know the perfect place; they have a chocolate fountain."

Mal's mouth dropped open. "That's a thing?" She asked.

Ben nodded, leaning forward as if he were telling her a secret. His eyes were sparkling. Whatever news Lumiere had interrogated him on, it must have been good. "And, you can dip strawberries in the chocolate."

Mal kissed Ben's cheek with a bright smile. You really are the best." She told him.

"I know." He shrugged, tossing his hair a little bit as he entwined his fingers with hers. "Now come on, let's see what Auradon thinks of you after all this." He guided her through the door, still smiling brightly. Adam followed them with a smile frozen on his face.

Mal's phone buzzed against her desk. She glanced up from where she was reviewing an official statement for the city mission and noticed it was a message from Ben. She let out a little laugh of disbelief as she skimmed it. "ROYAL SUMMONS – You'll never guess what actually turned up in
my office." Three winking emojis were attached to the end of the message.

Mal stood up, pushed her chair in, and turned off her computer. Then she flipped off the light and wandered down the hall, to the left, and through a winding corridor before she paused in an open doorway and knocked against the frame. Ben looked up from his work and smiled brightly to see her. He held up a yellow paper bag – the kind that had padding inside of it – and raised an eyebrow at her. "Your request came through." He told her.

"Sweet." Mal hummed, stealing a mint from a little bowl that had been set beside the door and wandering in. She kissed Ben's cheek and took the package from him before stealing a letter opener that was sitting on his desk. She took a seat on the edge of his workspace and upended the contents into her hand. A rock, heavy, black, and rough, fell into her hand. She frowned, pinching her lips together into a white line, and turned it over in her hands. Immediately, she saw why they'd chosen to bring this rock to the palace. On the underside was the outline of a circle. It had been cut in a perfectly symmetrical manner.

"This is from the island that disappeared, right?" Mal mumbled as she traced the rock with her fingertips.

"Yeah. Can you get anything off of it?" Ben asked, folding his hands together as he watched her work.

Mal ran her fingers on the surface of the rock and something smooth and silt-like brushed off. She examined it and lowered her hand to show Ben. It was sand and had been stuck in the crevice of the rock. They both watched as individual grains flashed a dim gold in her hand for a few seconds before the magic left the sand and sunk into her skin, leaving a feeling like little prickles. Magical blending. Mal hummed. "I doubt your sea creature is still in a physical form." She told him. "Something tells me the fact this was left behind means something." She pointed to the crevice. "You said it had tentacles? I bet it has some sort of jagged suction cups or something. Maybe one of them got stuck and it vanished to get free?"

"That... makes sense?" Ben shrugged, pressing the tips of his fingers together. "Can you tell anything about where it came from or where it went?"

Mal scoffed. "I'm still considered stunted by that barrier, Ben. I can't do that yet." She hummed though. The magic lingering on the rock seemed extremely familiar. "Could it be from the moors?" She hummed, flipping the rock around in her fingertips and closing her eyes as she focused, trying to feel for the magic like she had when she'd reformed the barrier.

"If we have creatures coming over from the moorlands and dragging Auradon islands into the ocean after I opened that section of the barrier, we're going to have problems, Mal," Ben warned. "I know. I'll take care of it on our end if it is." Mal sighed irritably. "I know this magic, I just can't place it."

"How hostile are the moors to Auradon, exactly?" Ben asked. He looked annoyed.

"It depends." Mal sighed hollowly. "Some of them are still angry and others like that we're married and just want to see you make changes in your international policies." She bit her cheek a little. "On second thought, I don't know if this is Moorish." She put the rock down on a paper from Charmington, apologizing for Chad's behavior, and squinted at it. "It's so, so familiar though."

The magic was unusual, harshly built, and even in this small increment, powerful. Mal chewed on her cheek. It almost had the same presence as...
Mal smirked. "Did you figure it out?" Ben asked, sitting up a little straighter.

"A large pile of cinderblocks." Mal hummed, running a finger down the side of the rock. "Ben, you still have Elsa's phone number, right?"

"Queen Elsa?" Ben furrowed his brow. "You think Queen Elsa had something to do with our monster? She was here when it happened."

"Only one way to find out." Mal hummed, picking up the rock and slipping it back into the envelope. "I need her number. Do you have it or not?"

Ben stared at her and shook his head. "Let's call her later tonight." He suggested. "She probably has lots to catch up on after being here the last two weeks."

Mal shrugged. She hummed and leaned the rock against Ben's desk on the floor before glancing over his work. "Still fighting Audrey at all?"

Ben scoffed. "No. I'm not, sorry. She's not going to back down and the more I fight her, the more it'll look like we're covering up something. I'm trying to protect against more rumors and questions."

Mal frowned. "So... we're going to let them continue to slather me, you, your parents and my mom?" She asked, putting her hands in her pockets.

"Please don't get mad at me again." Ben sighed. "I know you want me to do a big, official statement where I revoke everything, but I really don't want to draw more attention to the problem. And really, in the grand scheme of things, will it matter? I'm not saying Audrey's rumors aren't crap, and I have no possible way of knowing how much they're hurting you, but I'm trying to save your image as someone who doesn't strike back whenever someone says anything slightly criticizing of you."

Mal sighed and nodded. "Okay, I get it." She agreed. "And it doesn't matter too much. It's not like she's right."

Ben glanced up at her, and then he started pulling something up on his computer. After several seconds, he turned the screen towards her. Headlines were listed down the screen, all with her name attached. Mal's breath caught when she skimmed the first one. "Maleficent's Evil Spell – The REAL Reason Mal became Queen." Others read: "Powerless to Protect the Kingdom: The story of Belle and Adam's last days as monarchs", "How Queen Mal scammed her way to the throne", and "The Real Reason a Sixteen-Year-Old Became Queen."

"Have they... figured it out?" Mal asked, mouth dropping open a little.

Ben shook his head. "These are the conspiracy theories. No one is giving them much credit yet. But really, they're not too far off the mark." He turned the screen back towards him, clicked on a few things, and then read aloud. "When you take into account the rushed feeling of the situation and the sudden interest in the Isle, it makes sense that a curse would be involved. Perhaps Maleficent managed to open the barrier to curse her daughter and the crown Prince together."

"Wow." Mal hummed. "That's... really close."

"Yeah, people aren't really buying it though. They think the palace would have informed them if something had happened with the barrier. But, um, the rumors picked up a lot since I sent that email to Auroria. I think Audrey's leaving her fingerprints across the newsreels." He sighed and began shutting browsers. A knock at the door made them both glance over. It was Lonnie, dressed
in a pink tank top and white shorts. Ben straightened up. "Hi, Lonnie. You're a little early."

"Hey, Ben!" Lonnie greeted. "I can wait outside if you need."

"Nope, Mal and I just finished up." Ben smiled, standing as Lonnie entered the office and nodded to them both. "Ready to be a general?"

"Are you ready for me to be a general?" Lonnie laughed.

Ben chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Mal, I've got to interview Lonnie and approve her to start training with Auradon's general. Can I ask you to leave?"

"Sure." Mal shrugged, leaning forward and bumping fists with Lonnie. "I still need that number, okay?"

"Got it." Ben sighed. "We'll call tonight. Good luck in the office today."

"You too." Mal laughed. "Don't hurt him, Lonnie." She turned to leave, and Ben's hand snaked out to grab her hand.

"Hey," He rolled his eyes, leaning in and kissing her cheek. "Now you can go." He sat down and Mal raised an eyebrow at him but didn't say anything. She shut the door as Ben and Lonnie began to talk and returned to her office in silence.

The phone buzzed once, twice, and then there was a click. "Arendelle?" A feminine voice asked.

"Yes, this is Queen Mal from Auradon palace," Mal responded, fumbling in the drawers in the bathroom for a hairbrush and a hair tie. "I know it's late, but is Queen Elsa of Arendelle available?"

"Oh! Your Majesty, I apologize. The queen left the office about an hour ago, but if you can hold for two minutes, I can try and send for her." The secretary, or at least one of the servants, replied.

"That would be wonderful, thank you." Mal hummed. She walked out of the office and spotted Ben sitting on the couch, still in his work clothes, and with a small glass of amber liquid in front of him, which he sipped as he read a large book of laws that was laid across his legs. She walked behind him, ruffled his hair, and set the phone down beside his glass.

Ben raised his eyebrows at her lazily. "That on speakerphone?" He asked. Mal checked, then leaned into the couch, nodding. He hummed and turned the page. "Elsa?" He clarified.

"I'm on hold." She hummed.

Mal picked up his glass and made to take a sip, but he caught the rim and carefully pulled it out of her grasp, so as not to spill any. "No." He reprimanded with a semi-stern look. "You're not allowed."

"I'm the queen of Auradon." Mal wrinkled her nose. "I can do what I want."

"You have no power in Auradon." Ben shook his head. "Sorry, sweetheart, you listen to me."

Mal sighed irritably. The door opened behind them and Sophia appeared with a basket of laundry under her arm. Ben made a motion to Mal to take the phone off of speaker as her best friend waved and opened the door to the bedroom. Mal sighed and brought the phone up to her ear as Sophia rummaged around. The line remained silent for several minutes, and then there was a click.
"Are you still there?" The servant asked.

"I am," Mal affirmed.

"Queen Elsa of Arendelle has agreed to take your call. We will be connecting you to her personal line momentarily." The servant explained. Mal hummed in agreement, and the line clicked. After several seconds, there was a rustle.

"Hello?" Elsa asked, sounding like she was smiling.

"Evening." Mal smiled. "How is Auradon's favorite magical queen?"

"I don't know." Elsa laughed. "How are you?"

Mal rolled her eyes. "We're... great here, I guess. How are things at home? Are you terribly behind from being away so long?"

"Not quite." Elsa hummed. "I missed a few visitors, but Kristoff mostly covered the paperwork for me. I'm just having to reschedule a few things."

"That's wonderful. I hate having to go back and forth between my two kingdoms. There's always so much to catch up on afterward." Mal sighed. Sophia came out of the bedroom and waved again before she vanished into the hallway, shutting the door behind her. Mal brought the phone down from her ear and activated the speaker function. "Well, Elsa, Ben and I actually are calling with some... official questions tonight." She sighed.

"Oh?" Elsa asked. "About Arendelle?"

"About Auradon, actually," Mal corrected. Ben shut his book beside her and picked up his glass, swirling his drink in his hand. He leaned back into the couch, looking relaxed, and his hair fell in his eyes a little. Mal elbowed him a little and made a motion like scissors on her hairline. Ben chuckled softly.

"Elsa, while you were here, we had a call come from the far north," Mal explained, letting her voice take on an official tone that did, in all honesty, make her cringe. "Off the coast of the Great Forest, an entire island collapsed into the sea."

Silence stretched over the line. Elsa exhaled. "Just... vanished?" She asked. "Was it an earthquake?"

"A sea monster." Mal corrected. "Something large, with tentacles." A sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line made her glance towards Ben and raise her eyebrows. Ben pinched his lips together and sat up straighter. "We're still searching for it."

"Why are you telling me this?" Elsa asked. "I'm nearer the center of the continent, remember? Unless you want me to go up and-"

"No, I could do that myself if we didn't already think it's moved on to somewhere new." Mal reasoned. "Actually, I'm calling because some rescue ships managed to bring me back a rock with some magic dust-like substance stuck in it. Golden in color, very powerful. I read the signature on it." Mal paused, listening for Elsa's reaction. All that was on the other end was heavy breathing. Mal drummed her thumbs on her knees. "The magical signature was immediately familiar. Reminded me of, well, two someone's, but one in particular who left the castle just the last week."

"You can trace signatures?" Elsa asked, sounding intensely stifled.
"Not trace, yet. I can read and remember, though." Mal hummed.

"And you're calling me because..." Elsa trailed off.

"Ericka," Mal told the queen. "The signature matches Ericka's magic. And even Jessie's, a little bit."

"My daughters were both at the palace with me. Elsa hissed, suddenly hostile and cross. "I don't know what you're trying to insinuate."

"I'm not trying to insinuate that either of them could have pulled it off." Mal's tone became equally clipped as she spoke. "Believe me, I had so many leads on Ericka that there wasn't a room she went in that I didn't know. But that doesn't mean that they—or you—might not have clues as to what happened. Or, say, who it was."

"I don't know what it was." Elsa insisted. "I won't lie to you, Mal."

"Do you know where it came from?" Mal asked. "Or if there was anyone... specific involved?"

"I reserve the right to remain silent." Elsa snapped. "No one in my family was involved in the fall of the Island."

"Present or otherwise?" Mal asked.

"Present or otherwise." Elsa agreed, sounding very strained.

Mal drummed her fingers and looked at Ben. She held the phone out, and Ben exhaled. "Elsa?" He asked. "Do you know where the monster went, or where it came from?"

Elsa let out a ragged, exhausted sigh. "I don't know where it went." She sighed. "And I'm... sworn to secrecy." Her voice broke a little. "I had no knowledge of this event and no way or preventing it. I don't know of any illegal activities. My daughters are innocent."

"But the magical signature matches." Mal pointed out. "You obviously know a little bit about magical inheritance. If I could speak to Ericka and Jessie's father, then-"

"We're done here." Elsa cut her off. "I refuse to speak on the subject, even to you, Queen Mal. I give you my word, we are innocent. I can't help you any more than that. Good night."

"Elsa-" Ben began, but the line clicked, and Mal's phone indicated a canceled call. The two young rulers looked up at each other. "She knew," Ben mumbled in a shocked tone.

"She's sworn to secrecy." Mal hummed. "That signature, though... It was so similar." She leaned back into the couch, and her phone buzzed against her knee. She glanced down.

"Look into magical typing." Ben read aloud over her shoulder. "I promise the magic is nothing like Ericka or Jessie's."

Magical typing... Mal narrowed her eyes. Ben looked over at her. "What is it?" He asked.

"Pretty basic stuff." Mal sniffed. "There's different types of magic. I have nature-based, which is about as natural as you can get. Elsa has ice, Fairy Godmother, I think, has iron." She leaned back into the couch. "The rock had sand-based magic. Ericka and Jessie are ice-based, like Elsa. But Jessie takes more after her mom and Ericka take more after her dad. Same powers, built differently. Elsa's trying to point out that because there is a different type of magic involved, it can't have..."
anything to do with them, but I just remembered that typing also works for certain areas. Almost everyone in Auradon has similar types of magic because we all come from the moorlands. We're all related if we go back far enough. But Ericka... she's different. Her dad comes from somewhere else." She looked over at Ben. "The same place your monster came from."

"Elsa was very specific to say she wasn't doing anything illegal." Ben reasoned. "Could it be that someone escaped from the Isle? Or ducked under the law and is avoiding citizenship?"

"Maybe..." Mal sighed. "I don't know of anyone besides Elsa with Ice magic."

"Jack Frost had ice powers... he's the villain who tried to upstage Santa Claus." Ben deliberated. Mal opened her mouth, but Ben held a hand to her mouth. "Don't ask." He shook his head. "We have confirmation he's still on the Isle though. Frozone... he's married and retired with grandkids. I can't think of anyone else."

He slumped back into the couch.

Mal huffed. "Well, give it some more time, and I'll see if I can trace them." She ran her fingertips through her hair and leaned her head back, ruffling her short hair over the couch. Ben rolled his eyes and sipped his drink as he opened his book back up. She poked him with her foot and asked: "Why can't I have brandy again?"


"I want this on camera." Mal snorted, reaching for her phone. "Come on, Ben, do it again."

"No." Ben turned away from her and opened his book – again – refusing to look at the camera as she started filming him.

"This is Ben with his book of useless procedures and his favorite brandy." Mal narrated to the camera and jumped out of Ben's grasp as he made a swipe for her phone. "He's trying to be official, hence the brandy."

"It's not a brandy!" Ben exploded, throwing his hands into the air. "That's - you're - it's called a Cognac! Cog-nac. It's French!"

"Brandy, brandy, brandy." Mal babbled, jumping off the couch and darting closer to the door to the hall as Ben threw the book down and shook his finger at her.

"I don't care what Sophia told you! She's German, she doesn't get it!" Ben snapped. "Whatever she says, she's lying!" He tried to dodge around the couch, and Mal feigned left before bracing her body against one of the arms of the couch with a bright smile spread across her face as she continued filming his irate reaction.

"I'm going to wear socks to bed." Mal snickered. "And I'm going to leave the living room light on so you have to turn it off. And I'm going to bribe everyone in the palace to say 'brandy' around you."

"My parents love me more than you." Ben furrowed his brow. "They'll see things my way."

"Your dad and I were teaming up to gang on you the first month we knew each other." Mal snorted.

"Turn off the phone, Mal!" Ben demanded, jumping in front of the couch as she jumped behind it.

"Can I have your sword if I do?" Mal asked.
"You already have a sword!" Ben exclaimed in an exasperated tone.

"But yours is gold and pretty!" Mal protested.

Ben curled his lip at her, crossed his arms, and glared at her. Then, he jumped onto the couch, reached out, and snatched the phone. Mal tightened her grip on it, and he pulled her over the back of the couch and onto the floor by his feet. "Let... go!" He demanded, trying to wrench the screen from her fingertips. Mal snickered, keeping a tight hold on the phone, and stopped the video. She shut her phone off, effectively protecting her recording, and let go.

Ben whipped the screen around and glared at the passcode-protected screen. Mal snatched up the glass, half empty, and Ben snatched her wrist. "No." He told her. "Don't you dare." He examined her phone. "Did you record anything?" He asked.

Mal shrugged innocently, and Ben sighed and tossed her phone back to her. She caught it between her hands. He took the glass back from her and finished it with a glare. He set the empty glass down and put the book on the coffee table. Mal didn't turn her phone back on. There'd be plenty of time for her to post her clip of Ben lecturing her on his pet peeve later if she wanted. She watched him sit back down in front of her, and then laid her feet on top of his legs.

"You're in a joking mode tonight," Ben grumbled, setting a hand on her leg with an eye-roll. He leaned back into the couch. "What are we going to do about Elsa?" He mumbled.

Mal hummed and leaned over, squeezing his shoulder. "You'll figure it out. And really, give me like, two more months in the moors and I'll hunt your monster myself. It'll work out. Remember, you're going to be the best king Auradon will ever have."

Ben opened one eye and snorted at her. He patted her hand and leaned towards her. She obliged him, and they shared a quick kiss. Mal wrinkled her nose at the taste in his mouth. He tasted way, way too sweet. Almost like he was some sort of fruit candy or something. She withdrew, wiping her tongue with the back of her hand. "Ew." She grumbled. "Cognac is gross."

Ben's mouth dropped open and a hand flew to his mouth. "Did you... did you just kiss me for that?" He demanded.

"No." Mal shook her head. "And boy, am I regretting not thinking about that." She pushed his arm a little and shook her head. "I don't know why you like that stuff. It's nasty. Go wash your mouth out." She leaned back into the couch, rolling her eyes beneath her lids.

"Why? So you can kiss me more?" Ben snorted. He was staring at her with the corner of his mouth crooked up.

Mal opened an eye. Her heart fluttered in her chest as she caught Ben's gaze on her. "Unless you don't want to?" She asked.

Ben stood up and disappeared around the couch. A few seconds later, she heard the water start running in the bathroom. Her cheeks felt warm. The water shut off in the next room and she listened for footsteps across the carpet as Ben returned to the couch. He sat back down, making the cushions shift towards him, and Mal found his hand and tangled their fingers together. Ben, instead of leaning over to kiss her, twisted her ring on her finger. Mal opened her eyes and looked down. She didn't ever really pay attention to the diamond on her left hand, but she watched as Ben twisted it around on her finger, besides his. He pulled it off, examined the inside of the band, and made to put it back on. Mal stopped him, took the band, and examined the inside as well. Something like a scratch caught her eye. It was the word 'forever', engraved into the inside. Mal's stomach twisted,
and she carefully replaced it without saying a word to Ben. He hummed in the back of his throat and leaned his head on hers, twisting their left hands together.

"Are you really going to let me go?" Mal whispered, feeling bitter as she exhaled softly. "If the curse was broken next month, would you make me stick around?"

Ben swallowed. "No, I'd let you go." He whispered.

"Why?" Mal asked. "Aren't you supposed to hold onto the things you love?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes not." Ben ran a hand over hers and set her palm down on her knee. "If you love someone, and they want to leave, you let them go. Because if you don't, it means you only loved having them around."

A chill like ice-cold set into her spine. "But… what if they don't come back?"

Ben dropped an arm around her shoulders and buried his nose in her hair. He took a deep breath, and she knew he was trying to memorize the way she smelled. She, too, closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of him, his office, and of ink and paper. She almost missed his last remark.

"If they don't come back, you love them enough to hope they found something that made them happy, even if it doesn't involve you."

Mal moved her hand to Ben's knee and curled her head into his chest, feeling her eyes grow heavy. She couldn't tell the difference between her heartbeat and Ben's. He ran his fingertips through her curls and hummed meaninglessly as she fell asleep. This felt safe. This felt real. This felt strong. Not weak, or ridiculous. Just really, really amazing. And when Mal finally fell in love, it was like she'd opened the curtains to a bright, sunny morning. It was like she was finally waking up.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, Frozen, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, 101 Dalmanations, Aladdin, the Little Mermaid, Peter Pan, Bambi, or Mulan.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The Spell is unraveled. Spoiler in endnotes.

Chapter Notes

I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, Enchanted, or Mulan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He must have carried her to bed because she found herself curled up in the sheets, facing the window on the left side. Her side. Her hair had been pulled out of its ponytail and brushed back behind her ear, and her hand was set beside her cheek, just the way she usually kept it. Mal blinked a few times in the sunlight and a smile spread across her face. She was still in her day clothes from yesterday.

Ben's closet door opened, and he stepped out, rolling the cuffs up on a blue long-sleeved shirt until it was elbow length. He picked up a watch that had been set on the bed and put it on before looking over at her and letting a smile spread across his face when he saw her awake and watching him.

"Good morning," He greeted, leaning over and brushing her hair back a little. "You were tired."

"Not really. Just content. Thanks for taking care of me," Mal sat up and stretched her arms above her head. Her shirt and pants were wrinkled and felt stiff against her legs. This felt like a day for capris and her net jacket. She swung her feet over the edge and kissed Ben's cheek as she walked around to her closet. "How did you sleep?" She asked.

"Better than I will when you leave." Ben sighed. "Don't forget; you still need to pack."

Mal closed the door to her closet with a sigh. "I'll throw some things in a suitcase while I'm here in the room." She decided and then heard Ben shuffle around. There was a gentle rolling, and she chuckled when she realized it was him pulling her suitcase out from under the bed. "You didn't need to do that." She told him.

"Might as well. I'm all ready for today." Ben responded.

Mal switched her outfit to something fresh and airy before she opened the door with her foot. "I have something I need to ask you about – I'm kind of nervous about leaving the Isle at the moment." She chewed on her lip a little bit.

"Ask away." Ben invited, unplugging his phone and rolling his eyes at the number of messages he'd received overnight.

"Is there any way you can pass messages from the Isle on to me in the Moorlands?" Mal asked as
she dropped a small stack of t-shirts into a heap on top of her suitcase. An extra pair of boots, a collection of jeans, a few pairs of pajamas and some socks followed.

"Every evening." Ben nodded, sitting on the bed, half focusing on typing and half watching her pile grow. "But I won't leave office unless it's urgent."

"Fine by me. It's easier if I know you're calling in the evening anyway. I can hang around the fountain and listen to people's problems there." Mal decided. Ben watched her add a few more necessities, wondering if she'd actually end up needing his second suitcase and then watched Mal shut the door to her closet behind her and kick the side of the suitcase. "Make it easy, make it quick; fold it up so that it fits." She commanded the suitcase. Green light emitted from it, and the clothes began to neatly stack and refold themselves, fitting into the suitcase so impossibly well that Ben wondered if maybe the spell had also enlarged the suitcase. A smile pulled at the side of his mouth. She sat down on the bed beside him with a sigh. "What do you have this month?" She asked.

"Summer Solstice is coming up, so I'll have to start preparing for that. Thankfully the interviews and investigations happen in June, so I won't be wiped out then. Dad's agreed to help double-check everything I schedule. He's can't do much else without me having to leave position a little." Ben shrugged. "Mostly just a full month of sleeplessness. What about you?"

Mal shrugged. "I'm nervous to leave to Isle. I mean, we're so, so close. Soon I'll be able to see all my old friends in the city and we'll be able to start setting up communities. It's in such a… delicate stage." She hummed. "You know, more people have signed up for future city garrison than Auradon has on record. And I think less than forty percent of the Isle has signed up for a card. In fact, we're nearing twice the number that Auradon had on record for Isle residents."

Ben winced. "Oh, dear. How did everyone manage to keep from starving to death?"

"Well, obviously not everyone did." Mal shrugged. "I wish I had an idea of what the death toll is, but oh well." She brushed her hands on her jeans. "After this, I should have a record of every single person in the city. The cards can't be forged without my magic or my permission, and they're dissolved as soon as someone dies. I think I actually managed to create a mostly crime-free system."

"You're amazing." Ben nodded. "Do you have enough cards for everyone?"

"Yeah," Mal affirmed. "I kind of anticipated it would be like this. I mean, thirty years is a long time… I think Gaston has teenaged grandchildren by now. Strangely enough, everyone coming in is single. I haven't had one family or any groups come to me to request a family home. Just lots and lots of apartments and roommates."

"Has anyone you know signed up for cards?" Ben asked.

Mal ran her fingers through her hair. "Well, yeah, strictly speaking. I know lots of people. Just… it's more who hasn't signed up that concerns me."

"Your friends?" Ben prompted.

Mal brushed her hair behind her ear with a huff. "Not one has signed up." She nodded. "It's making me worried. I saw some things when I went to our old hideout and… I wonder what their parents and my mom are saying about me. I kind of thought they'd… want to see me again, I guess."

Ben put an arm around her shoulders. "You'll see them. Maybe they're just waiting to see what's
going on." He hesitated. "Do you have any infrastructure going up?"

Mal exhaled. "Most of the people coming in are young adults and teenagers, but many are already picking and choosing things. One man volunteered to teach anyone interested how to make furniture and he's planning on making a business out of it. This one girl had the idea of holding classes in one of the business buildings, and she's going to give me a syllabus. One young lady is teaching self-defense classes, another expressed interest in starting a store, and a young man who you charged with murder wrote me a private letter asking for a plot of land. He's going to grow and sell food in exchange for not having to live with anyone else."

Ben nodded. "When do the last products you ordered from Auradon go over?"

Mal exhaled again. "Next week." She sighed. "I'll already be gone." General items such as tables, chairs, children's toys, and many different food items had been arranged to be shipped to the city. Mal had gone to a young man of twenty and offered to pay him a regular wage to sell or distribute items as new people came in. It was a hefty tax at the moment, but Mal was carefully keeping track of her expenses, and she had faith that her endeavors would pay off.

Ben put his phone down and, with one arm still around her, patted her knee. "I'll keep you updated. Everything will be fine."

"Okay." Mal agreed. "But don't forget Auradon. Remember, it's not really your job to keep up with my kingdom. We both have our places."

"You still mad at me for saying I don't want you covering Auradon anymore?" Ben raised an eyebrow.

"No." Mal shook her head. "Sorry. That was some real bad… angst. I really do understand, and it's honestly kind of a relief. I'm just not… trained to handle Auradon like you are." She sighed and patted his leg. "Okay, I'm packed. Is there anything else I need to do while I'm at the Isle today?" She squeezed her eyes shut in thought.

"Barrier good?" Ben asked. "I thought you mentioned something about it at breakfast."

"Oh, right. There's a chink that might let people who have powers of magical transportation out." Mal sighed. "We need to fix it. And go through loopholes. Good thing I know what to look for." She rolled her eyes. It had been years since Carlos had punched that hole in the barrier, but she still knew what she needed to fix it from happening again. With a hum, she laid her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry I have to go again."

"Me too." Ben yawned. "I wish we didn't have to work."

"Maybe one day." Mal shrugged. "Maybe when the Isle is stable, and the moors don't panic whenever I leave…"

"That won't happen." Ben sighed. "Auradon has been stable since I was born, and they still whine and demand things of me." He patted her shoulder. "And what do you mean, one day?"

Mal swallowed. "Well… we could take a vacation, or…" She trailed off and took a deep breath. "Or something. Before the curse is broken."

Silence stretched out between the two. Mal kept her head leaning against Ben's shoulder, but only because she didn't want to hurt him by drawing away. The atmosphere was so tense and awkward that she almost immediately began to gain a headache. Finally, Ben glanced at his watch. "The boat to the Isle will leave soon." He whispered. "Remember to be back by seven. The gates still close at
"Can you extend that?" Mal sighed. "I think nine is a good time to close gates. It's hard to get off the Isle by five."

"I'll think about it." Ben hummed. "Now, I have to get to my office. Wish me luck?" He stood up, withdrawing his arm from around her, and leaned down to kiss her cheek. Mal caught his shoulders and kissed his mouth instead, drawing him close to her as she did.

"Good luck," She whispered, out of breath as she stood up. Ben hugged her, and then he disappeared out the door. Mal sat down on the bed and kicked her suitcase lightly with her toe. She tried to focus on her plans for the city today. They needed to fix the barrier… make sure that the spring they'd cleaned out was still good for piping fresh water from and would remain that way, and… that was it. She was almost done. The barrier was up. The air was in the process of being cleaned. All of the homes were still empty and white, but Mal couldn't wait to see what would happen as soon as she let people inside.

And as soon as she returned from the moorlands, she'd have a nation with recorded citizens. Mal picked up her suitcase and considered what that'd be like as she flipped off the light and walked out the door. She'd have a nation, less than a full year after coming to the palace. Incredible.

There was still so, so much that she needed to do. So many people and things and, really, she needed a partner. Ben was awesome to bounce ideas off of, but he had his own kingdom to worry about. Mal wished she had someone else on the Isle who could help her keep everything working and help her instigate the things she talked about with her husband.

Sophia was finishing braiding her hair back as she walked out of the West Wing and into the Entrance Hall. "Hey!" She called, watching Mal wheel her suitcase beside the door for when she left later that night. "Headed to the Isle?" She asked.

"I am." Mal smiled and watched Sophia hurry down the steps. Her normal work outfit had been modified a little bit. She was wearing a blue blouse with billowy sleeves and brown pants that were tucked neatly into her standard lace-up black boots. A pretty beaded headband was laced through her hair. The two girls exchanged hugs as Sophia hit the base of the stairs.

"Can I come with?" Sophia asked. "Things are slow today for work."

"Sure." Mal nodded. "I'm only going to be in the city today. Poor Ericka didn't know how to react to the rotten part."

"Not a problem." Sophia shook her head. The two girls headed outside, where Stewart was waiting to take Mal to the Isle. His smile grew bright when he recognized both girls.

Mal opened her own door while Sophia and Stewart exchanged a hug. She climbed inside, and Sophia followed. Stewart drove them down to the docks, only opening the window twice to talk. He saw them both up onto the ship that Mal usually frequented to take her over and then waved until the boat disembarked.

"So, what are the plans for today?" Sophia asked, leaning against the ship's barrier and watching the waves roll towards the beach.

"I'm trying to get the Isle prepared for when I leave." Mal sighed. "As soon as I get back, I'm going to try and start handing out cards, so I need to make arrangements for everything I can't finish today to be done while I'm away."
"Do you have anyone in the city to help you out?" Sophia asked with a frown.

"Not really." Mal shook her head. "The city is mostly empty now. Builders are heading home. All Isle residents are out. I have people – volunteer workers from Auradon, mostly, who are bringing things in, but that's it. I'm probably going to be working on the south side of the area. Apparently, the pollution is heavier there and we're having to work a little harder to get the ground restored." She rolled her eyes. "I have moorpeople coming next month to help me out. We'll see how things go."

Sophia nodded in understanding and then leaned over to elbow Mal. "Did you finally figure things out with Ben?" She asked.

Mal blinked. "Figure things out?" She asked. "What were we working on?"

"Just on, you know, being together." Sophia shrugged. "Do you feel like you have a system yet?"

Mal laughed. "I think so. We're pretty good at, like, coexisting and then coming back around to support each other."

"That's great." Sophia smiled. "I think he and his parents finally straightened things out about you too."

Mal processed her words and then turned towards her friend with a frown. Foamy sea spray hit her face. "About me?" She asked. "Were they fighting?"

Sophia shrugged. "It happened over Christmas. Belle… she's very torn over this situation. She asked Ben if he thought you two would have kids by next year, and he snapped at her that you were still sixteen. Since then, they've been trying to find a, well, balance."

Mal hesitated. "The curse still might be broken." She reminded Sophia in a hollow tone, slumping her shoulders a little as she did. The reminder didn't cause her any relief or even echo any wish. What was wrong with her? Did she actually want to stay trapped?

On the other hand, if she stayed, she stayed with Ben, who she was positive she was in love with now. Mal swallowed. "I hadn't heard." She hummed. "What about you and Stewart?"

Sophia sensed Mal didn't want to talk about her jumble of her love life, and so began to talk about her own sweet, sensitive experience. Mal tuned out bits as she watched fish leap out of the water and the Isle draw closer, but she got the gist of it. They were on the same page, accelerating at the same rate, communicating, and falling deeper and deeper into love.

A group of volunteers gathered on the beach as they noticed the ship approaching. The sands were almost entirely a clean, white-yellow color. Bits of clogged grey, brown, and black remained, but they were quickly fading. As Mal jumped off the ship, three of the volunteers broke off the group to come and speak to her. Sophia backed off a little as one raised their hand to signal that they needed her. "Queen Mal!" They called. "We have a problem in apartment two. Do you have any time you could come to see it?"

"I suppose." Mal sighed. "What kind of problem is it?"

"A building error on the third level steps." The speaker, a girl with close-cropped hair, explained with a tight frown.

Mal exhaled. "I can check it out." She nodded and turned to Sophia. "Want to come with? You're free to do whatever you want, but I have to be back at the palace by four so I can leave in time."
"Can I wander a little bit?" Sophia asked, eyeing the large, curved walls and the almost-blue waves rolling up onto the beach. She couldn't believe this place was the same spot she'd seen pictures of in Mal's office. The girl certainly had vision. "This place is pretty incredible."

"Of course." Mal nodded. "The apartments and buildings all have plaques outside. I'll be in number 2. It's that one right there." She pointed to one of the tall, white buildings, and Sophia nodded before she watched Mal turn and be led away by her accomplices. As she left, Sophia heard her start to say: "We really need to get emergency equipment out here while I'm gone. We already have fire safety, but I want to make sure..." before she was gone.

Sophia stuck her hands into her pockets and wandered down to the beach. The ocean smelled odd. It clearly wasn't good yet. However, she could see the place where the wall ended and gave way to the rotten part of the Isle, and the sight of the water there made her queasy. The barrier had sealed out the ocean currents from there, and she could see a thick wall of black, inky water. Everything, even the smell, was kept outside of the inner barrier, but it was still visible. She looked down at the blue-grey waters and decided to keep away until it was fully cleaned.

There was even contrast between the air inside and out of the barrier. Thick smog clouds still hovered above the rotten portion of the Isle while a beautiful blue sky stretched over the white buildings in Mal's territory. Sophia recalled Mal wanting to loosen the outer barrier restrictions so that ocean water and air could filter across the peninsula, but she didn't seem to have completely fixed the problem yet. The 9,000 square kilometers that Mal had claimed for building, however, allowed the elements from the ocean to actively mix, meaning it had a natural ecosystem. It really was fascinating, Sophia thought as she wandered, how everything had lined up just so.

As she scuffed her shoes on the slowly-softening soil to brush it up, whispers brushed her ears. She looked up and realized that she'd wandered straight up to the doorway to the rotten part of the Isle, where a crowd of children and young adults, ages six to almost thirty, were gathered and talking excitedly about the new area.

"Look at the dirt!" Someone exclaimed. "It looks so different in the light! And there's almost no shine to it!"

Sophia brushed her hair back and stepped into the view of the kids. She didn't go under the entrance though. She knew better than to leave the refuge, especially with Mal still nowhere in sight. They stared at her in surprise and wonder. A couple of the older people looked concerned, but no one withdrew as she smiled shyly at them. "I think she was talking about bringing grass seed over." She confided. "But she might not. The moor people she'll be bringing next month are supposed to be talented with plant life. She might just have them fix things."

"Amazing." One kid said in a hushed tone, looking down at the ground where the barrier began. There was an obvious and immediate difference from one inch outside of the barrier to one inch inside. "What color will it be?" He asked.

"Green," Sophia informed him with her throat a little tight. "Most plants grow green. But maybe the moor people will bring blues and purples and pinks. That will happen as you all are coming in."

"When?" a tall, stringy teenager asked, pulling his fingerless, worn gloves up on his hands a little more. His bright blue eyes were probably the lightest thing on his side of the barrier.

"Next month." Sophia smiled. "On the first or the second, when she returns. She'll be handing out cards all day, keeping track of the people who want to come in and informing them of the rules. She or someone with her permission has to give the magical oath to seal the card and allow you
The effect of her words was sudden. Some people looked confused and suddenly worried as they looked back and forth, but others were still nodding eagerly and looking excited.

"Magical oath?" Someone asked slowly, from the back. Sophia couldn't tell who it was.

"Yes." She nodded. "I don't know the details. Mal talks about it at dinner sometimes, though. I know you all have to promise to give up villainy, and any major infractions will cause you to lose your card and return to the outside, though she'll give second chances within reason."

"When I live in the city, I'm not going to let anyone be bad!" A small girl, maybe ten, jumped up with her hand in the air. "I'm going to help everyone be good so that I don't have to come back!" Sophia laughed at her enthusiasm.

"I think that's a good idea." A tall man with whiskers, but a hopeful expression agreed. "I'm tired of villainy. It'll be nice to not have to fight for food and to be able to learn things. If the villains want to be villains, they can stay here. I want to be there, where I can make things better, and if anyone comes over thinking they can keep bullying us and stealing and plundering, then they'll have two more things coming!" He cracked his knuckles and neck so sharply that Sophia jumped.

"The oath should mostly take care of things." She exhaled. "And it's not like she'll send people back for every small thing. We're talking people who are actively trying to steal, damaging property, threatening or stalking people. And there are other repercussions by degrees. It'll be difficult at first, but we have faith."

Kids were exchanging dark looks though, glancing around at the others who were eagerly hanging onto her words. It occurred to Sophia that maybe not everyone had been planning on giving up villainy, only spreading it to the new place. She swallowed and prayed Mal would know what to do with those who came over thinking they could hack the system. Of course, there would be no stealing, and Mal would know the moment an oath was broken, but it was still very, very risky.

"What about magic?" One young girl in her teens asked. "My dad was an evil fairy – is it possible I got his magic? Can I use it over there?"

"Yes, you can." Sophia nodded with a bright smile. "Mal isn't bringing any of Auradon's laws about magic over. She says they're nonsense. Just remember, she's the queen of the ancient lands, where you all get your magic from, and she rules over you no matter where you go. She's much, much stronger than she lets off, as well. If you're caught trying to mess with her system or break her barrier, she will find you, and not even the King of Auradon will be able to stop her then."

The group exploded into talk. "Magic!" They exclaimed. "There'll be magic!"

Abruptly, people broke off of the group and began to dash away. Others followed, whooping all the way back or slinking back into the shadows, looking unsure. Sophia watched them go with a sense of foreboding. It seemed Mal was still fighting to prove to people how good she was… when they wanted her to be otherwise.

The group dispersed completely. Sophia stood by the gateway for a few seconds, examining the outside. It was dark and gloomy, and though the barrier protected her nose, she could only assume it smelled horrible.

She was about to turn away when one of the shadows moved and a person materialized out of the trees with a perfectly straight face. They moved towards the edge of the barrier and put their hand
up to test it, keeping their eyes on her the entire time. Sophia felt an odd feeling come over her. She felt like she should know this person, yet she didn't. She put her hands in her pockets and watched the person spread their palm on the barrier, and then shift their eyes down to the docks, where the ship they'd come over on was being unloaded.

It was a girl. She was in her early twenties and was very tall. She was also surprisingly clean and well-dressed for a villain kid. Her clothes had even seams, no rips, and many, many decorative appliques in the forms of rhinestones, chains, zippers, and paint. She was wearing a black skirt with protective blue leggings underneath leading down her legs into some heels with, strangely, apple charms. A long-sleeved blue shirt protected her arms from the air that Sophia remembered Mal talking about. This was one of the first people Sophia had seen so far to wear makeup. Blue eyelashes, dark black eyeliner and silver eyeshadow, different variations of cream, foundation, and concealer, blush, lipstick, the works. Necklaces and rings decorated her even further, along with an ornate hair comb tucked into her blue hair.

The girl nodded, still stone-faced but intensely beautiful nonetheless, down to the beach. "Did you come with her?" She asked softly.

Sophia nodded. "I did." She confirmed. "I wanted to see the Isle."

"That isn't the Isle." The girl rolled her eyes and shifted her eyes back to Sophia. "But feel free to come over if you really want."

Sophia shrugged. "I'll pass. Maybe later, if her majesty decides she wants to head over." A small smile broke across her lips. "It's kind of strange to say that and be referring to Mal." She laughed.

The girl pursed her lips and crinkled her eyes at Sophia's words as if something there had hurt her. Sophia examined the girl further. She noticed silver embroidery on the corner of her skirt and pointed to it. "What does that say?" She asked.

The girl turned to display her outfit, placing her hands on her hips. Someone somewhere had trained her for modeling. "It says Fairest of Them All." She declared proudly.

"Ah, the Evil Queen." Sophia nodded. "Did you make it?"

"I did," The girl straightened up and a light came into her eyes. "The embroidery was hard because the fabric isn't very flexible, so I had to make sure it wouldn't pucker at all."

"It's very good!" Sophia praised, bending forward a little. "It looks almost professional! Yes, I know all about the maneuverability of those fabrics. It's why I don't work with them all that often. I actually did my own designs here, on my shirt." Sophia gestured to the collar of her blue shirt, which was accentuated with many blue and white flowers. The Isle girl looked impressed.

"Those look really good. Did you come up with the pattern yourself?" She asked.

"My mother taught me how to make the flowers, but I made the pattern." Sophia beamed. "It's nice to talk to someone who knows a bit about sewing."

"It is." The girl nodded. "Have you ever thought of embroidering beads behind the flowers? Some flat silver ones would make them pop out."

"I haven't." Sophia shook her head, trying to imagine the look. "Maybe when you come into the city, you'll have to help me try it out."

The girl shook her head. "I don't know if I'll go into the city." She sighed.
Sophia frowned. "Why not?" She asked, stepping forward and crossing her arms. She was dangerously close to the barrier now.

"I don't want to be trapped by the palace." The Isle girl hummed. "I mean, this is their giant ploy to make us good. By bringing Auradon to our backyards to show us how much better being good is. And once we're in their system, they'll dissolve whatever Mal's throwing up and force us to be like them."

Sophia's mouth dropped open. "Oh, no." She shook her head. "Listen, I work in the palace. There is no talk of that going on at all. Mal isn't going to let King Ben take the Isle back, and King Ben thinks she's done far better than he ever could have anyways. They want to keep the two places separate because they agree that the Isle people were wronged by Auradon. That's why he's been helping her make so many reparations."

"I don't believe that." The Isle girl shook her head. "If you knew what I know, it'd be all too clear to you that the palace is just trying to save their own necks. They never cared about us before. Why would the king be so partial to our cause now?"

"Because now there's a different king, who is married to an islander," Sophia explained. "And she really forced him to see things her way or hit the road. Ever since she came, he's been trying to make all of Auradon better and to do the right thing, rather than the easy thing. He wants to fix things his parents got wrong." Sophia paused and examined the girl. "What makes you think they're just going to throw away everything Mal's done?"

"Because she's a pawn." The girl explained bitterly. "They're using her as a spokesperson, someone the people look up to. They're taking advantage of their own horrible situation and trying to use her to manipulate their outcasts."

"Their own horrible situation?" Sophia repeated. The Isle girl crossed her arms, and a cold feeling settled into Sophia's spine. "You know about the spell?"

The Isle girl took a half-step back, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms. "You know about the spell?" She hissed in a low, breathy tone. "I wasn't aware they were sharing that information with anyone."

"Well, I'm the Queen's best friend, and her personal servant, so I get bits of secret information," Sophia explained.

An abrupt look of pain passed over the Isle Girl's face and she took a step back in something that looked like horror. A hand came up to her chest, clawing a little over her heart, and her eyes were wide as she stared at Sophia. It was the most emotion she'd seen from the young woman so far. Sophia almost stepped out of the barrier to help her and caught herself. "Are you okay?" She asked. "What's wrong?"

"You're the Queen's best friend?" The girl repeated in a quiet tone.

Sophia hesitated. "Well, from Auradon at least. I know she has friends on the Isle that she's hoping to talk to again once they're away from her mother's reach. But I've known her almost as long as King Ben has known her. I helped teach her things about Auradon and helped her get ready for her wedding. I also maintain her wardrobe and we gossip about Ben and my boyfriend together." Sophia let another smile dance across her mouth at the memories.

"Maintain her wardrobe." The Isle girl repeated mournfully. "Help her get ready."
"Yeah." Sophia agreed cautiously, watching the girl's hands shake. A thought occurred to her. "You know her, don't you? That's how you know about the spell."

"I knew her." The girl corrected in a devastated tone. "I think I still know her."

"She hasn't changed much." Sophia tried to console her. "She's fiery and sassy. Being married hasn't really changed her."

"Well, I hope not. The palace is stealing all this time and all her efforts, I hope they don't get the chance to steal her spirit before she gets away." The Isle girl shook her head and adjusted her sleeves.

"She's not planning on leaving." Sophia frowned. "I mean, this is secret stuff I'm telling you, but the curse doesn't allow them to be apart for long anymore."

The Isle Girl's face twisted up. "I see." She frowned. "So that's why she hasn't ditched. What a beautiful excuse to keep her under King Useless's thumb."

"Do you have a problem with Ben?" Sophia asked slowly.

"He stole her from us, forced her to wed him, and has kept her trapped all these months." The Isle girl snapped. "So, yeah, a small problem with the King."

"It's not like that." Sophia shook her head. "The palace has been nothing but fair to Mal. Even she says so. Through everything, we've been trying to make this easier on her."

"I'm sure." The Isle Girl turned away. "It's fair because he gets a beautiful girl in his bed every night, an Isle Villain to show off how benevolent he is, and a spokesperson to reel in the rebellious part of the country. Meanwhile, she gets a phony crown and a bunch of palace guidelines."

"Queen Mal doesn't adhere to the palace guidelines." Sophia disagreed. "She's technically a member of the royal party, but she has her own two thrones, so she ignores the fact she's Auradon's queen. She's her own escort, she doesn't need Ben's arm, and she certainly doesn't need him to tell her what to do or say." She examined the young woman. "I think I know you now. You're… Suzie?"

"My name is Evie. I'm Mal's best friend." She studied Sophia's reaction.

Sophia nodded. "That's right." She nodded. "I remember you now. Mal said you were the fairest of them all." She hesitated, examining Evie. "Why won't you come into the city?"

Evie frowned, staring hard at Sophia. "King Ben stole her from us. And I don't believe the lies they're making her say on TV."

Sophia stared. A sad feeling was welling up in her chest. "I think you're mistaken." She mumbled. "Listen, I can go get Mal. I can get her to talk to you. She'll explain everything, about Ben and his parents and the kingdom. They're not abusing her or manipulating her. In fact, she's happy."

Evie scoffed and turned away. "Whatever. Either you're as blinded by their lies as everyone else or you're lying."

Sophia paused. "Or maybe you're just blinded by the way things were. You realize that coming here would allow you to find out. Get her alone. Ask her anything you can think of. Prove to yourself that it's not all a lie."
She held her hand up to the barrier and took a step forward. "Are you afraid to find out?" She asked.

"I'm not afraid of anything!" Evie disagreed, turning back. "Isle girls never are."

"Evie, I've been there since the beginning." Sophia tried to console her. "When she was first brought to Auradon, I was one of the first people she could talk to, and the only person she could talk to about Ben. I watched her come out of a panic where her face was white, and her eyes weren't focusing, and she couldn't hear us because she was so scared of being there. I'm the girl who moved all their things into one room and who helped her both into and out of Queen Belle's wedding dress. I've seen practically everything. I'm being totally honest here. I think you've been seeing a completely different side than the one Mal has actually been showing of herself."

"I still think you're wrong." Evie shook her head, clenching her fists. "Because that doesn't sound like the Isle girl I know." She turned and vanished dramatically into the shadows and the scraggly trees.

Sophia watched her go with a feeling like ice in her fingertips and a pang of deep sadness in her heart. She stood there, looking for any trace of the blue-clad girl, and then stepped back into the safety of the utopia.

"Sophia!" Someone called from afar. She looked up and spotted the tell-tale wild purple locks as Mal hurried over. "What are you doing near the exit?"

Mal's cheeks were a little red as she reached Sophia and glanced out of the walls. Sophia wondered if Evie would reappear to confront her friend, but it didn't seem like it. "Was someone here?" Mal asked.

"A group of people." Sophia nodded, letting her hands fall to the sides. "I told them about when you're going to open the city, and what the magic is going to be like in here. And then they left and there was a girl. She appeared out of the trees."

"Did you leave the barrier?" Mal frowned, glancing suspiciously at the earth, where several footprints were in the dirt on their side of the barrier. The other side was too hard for any such indentation to have been made.

"No." Sophia shook her head and examined the queen. "The girl… she had blue hair."

Mal's head snapped up and a tiny smile spread across her mouth. "Did she give a name?" She asked eagerly.

"Evie." Sophia nodded with her heart sinking into her chest a little.

"Oh my goodness, I can't believe I missed her." Mal put a hand to her mouth and then straightened up. "I wonder if she's any taller than she was before. Did she mention coming to see me at all?"

Sophia frowned. "She says she's not coming to the city. She… doesn't believe that you're doing this yourself."

Mal stared at Sophia, and her shoulders dropped. She squeezed her eyes closed. "I should have risked it." She whispered. "Back when I decided not to send them anything, I should have risked my mom trying to use them to bait me. Now… I don't know how to convince them I'm not lying."

She rubbed a hand over her brow and exhaled. "I-I have to focus on the city. As soon as people finish coming in, if they don't come, I'll go back out for them."
"But your mom." Sophia exhaled. "What about her?"

"I have to do it." Mal shook her head. "If I don't, I'll regret it for the rest of my life." She exhaled again. "As soon as I come back from the Isle, I'll set things rolling. Everything will be fine." Mal glanced up at Sophia. "Want to help me fix things in the business buildings? I want to check all the locks and make sure they'll engage properly."

Sophia nodded and followed her friend back to the city. Later that night, Mal left for the moorlands. She wasn't aware that, while she was gone, a different sort of major breakthrough would be reached.

"I don't see why we're still working on this stupid thing." Abraham Gentler complained to the Fairy Godmother in rising tones as he ripped a twenty-page-thick analysis of the Royal Spell in half. Everyone around them winced and looked away. "It's completely infallible, with no weaknesses, broken edges, or wavers. All of the trauncts are so tightly woven together, there are no hinks at all." He slammed the two halves into the trash and pushed his keyboard back into his desk. The poor woman in blue closed her eyes and exhaled.

"Abraham." Thomas Maverik sighed, pinching the bridge of his long nose. "If this spell was on you, you'd want it broken too."

"Yeah, but this won't even change anything with the king and queen." Abraham scoffed. "They're alive, happy, well, in love, the whole she-bang. Aside from his sleeplessness, which shouldn't even happen, the spell isn't even affecting them." Abraham scoffed and rolled his chair away from the computer where he was staring relentlessly at the intense weaving on Maleficent's Master Spell.

"Mal has problems too." Fairy Godmother reminded them. "Rot all up her hands."

"But it goes away the moment she's near him again." Abraham rolled his eyes. "It's not like they'll die if we never break the curse."

Thomas balled his fist and took a deep breath.

"Not you too, Thomas." The Fairy Godmother sighed. "We have to keep trying, don't you two see?"

"We see." Thomas snapped irritably. "But the fact remains that in two months, we will have been staring at this stupid spell for a year with no breakthroughs and no alternatives. You can't honestly expect us to examine this for the rest of our lives."

Fairy Godmother put her head in her hands. "If… nothing can be found, I'll ask the crown for permission to cease trying." She sighed miserably.

Thomas sighed. He felt bad for snapping at the delightful older woman, but for months now he had been seeing this stupid framework whenever he closed his eyes.

Abraham scoffed. "I'm about ready to be done. If nothing can be found by the end of this week, I'm out." He picked up his coat and headed to the door.

"Abraham!" Thomas protested.

"I'm done, Thomas!" Abraham replied as the door swung closed behind them. Around them, other spell-breakers began to pack up and leave.
Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. The Fairy Godmother clasped her hands. "Please Thomas." She pleaded. His heart went out to the poor woman. "You're the best spell-breaker we have. You were in this department before the Isle of the Lost was even formed. Do you have any idea, any leads at all?"

Thomas balled his fists up and stood from his desk. He began to pace. "There's nothing." He admitted. "No one in the entire room can find anything. We've stimulated the effects of everything. Water, fire, nitrous acid, everything. We could even vaporize the queen and king and nothing would change about the curse. I've examined the curse of Aurora forwards, backward, back and forth. They're nothing alike. I have samples of the new queen's magical aura, and despite being similar it resembles nothing I've ever seen before. And Queen Mal's magical counterbalance is off for some reason, probably from living on the Isle, so she can't even break it herself. This spell is, frankly, undefeatable." He sighed and sat back down.

On his computer were several different files, one of which was a graph. He gestured her over. "This is the closest I've come." He said, tracing it with his finger. "Maleficent had a definitive growth of magic over her life. She increased, like every other fae ever. We still have tails on her to track her magic. Anyway, I did notice she gained more…" Thomas rubbed his fingers together as she searched for the right word. "Radioactivity to her magic. Or, like, a netting. That's a better term, actually. Forget radioactivity. Anyway, netting. She made layers of different kinds of magic within her magic. And these layers increased as she got older. Again, like every fae ever. The more you understand your magic and use it, the more complex it grows. However, around the time Stephan first became king in modern-day Auroria, she had a major stunt and then power boost, after which her magic took on more restrictive trauncts and fewer hinks began appearing in her netting across her spells. We know this from the analysis on the historical barrier of thorns that surrounded the moors. It was almost like she figured out how to shrink the netting on her spells. What we're seeing here is like that growth on steroids. Something about this is screaming major psychological trauma to me since we see things like this all the time now that magicals can't use their magic, but this didn't reverse itself. Now, they're only even smaller. These are, by far, the tiniest trauncts I've ever seen in a spell. And not only are they smaller, but they're also interlocked between the layers, which you already know." Thomas sighed. "Her magic style changed dramatically. But since magic changes based on surroundings I can loosen it if I could figure out what happened. Unless I have more specific evidence of what kind of stress her magic was under to form this type of change, I'm stuck on how to lessen its effects."

"So, in short." The Fairy Godmother murmured, "we still need to know what happened to change Maleficent's magic."

Thomas winced. He must have already given her this rundown. He couldn't even remember anymore. The days had been blending into each other for so long he couldn't even remember what it was like to not come into work and stare at this spell.

A younger spellbreaker was standing nearby. Thomas turned to examine him. "Yes?" He asked.

"I, uh." The boy coughed. "I was doing a lot of research today, actually, on Maleficent. And, ahem, have either of you heard of the Twenty-two unspeakable punishments?"

"Of course." The Fairy Godmother said quietly. "That's why the King of Auradon has to be twenty-two to be coronated, not sixteen like before."

Thomas rolled his eyes and muttered fiercely under his breath: "And also because sixteen is a horrible age to become king anyway."

Thomas heard the young man cough awkwardly as the Fairy Godmother chuckled a little. "Yeah,
well, anyway, did you know that two of the punishments were Maleficent's? And, I don't know which one or anything, but it might be one of those."

Thomas turned to look at the Fairy Godmother. "Maleficent has two?" He asked. "What did I miss in history class?"

"Malfaisant - Narissa." Fairy Godmother nodded. "It was renamed to alleviate confusion. Malfaisant was Maleficent's French name, which Auroria knew her by before Aurora's curse. That punishment was when they took off both Maleficent and Queen Narissa's left feet and replaced them with each other. Very gruesome. Both almost died."

Thomas pulled a leg up on his knee with an emphatic exhale. "Narissa was who again?" He asked.

"Giselle, Andalusia?" The Fairy Godmother prodded. Thomas nodded.

"Well, she was magical." Thomas exhaled. "Listen, I'm not going to hold my breath much, but if you could find something, anything on Narissa's magic, I'll look into it. Okay?" Thomas stood up and took his coat off the seat.

The Fairy Godmother sighed. "Okay." She said. "I'll look into it. I know off the top of my head though, that her magic was strictly hydrophobic. Most of the times, a bit of water would destroy most of the molding. Hers is usually designed so water runs straight off. " She smiled at the young messenger. "Thank you, young man. Have a wonderful evening."

"No problem." The kid stuttered as he backed away. "I just want to be done too." He backed up quickly to the door and tripped up the stairs on his way out. Thomas rolled his eyes as he shrugged on his coat. He kissed the Fairy Godmother's hand, said goodnight, and headed away from the blasted lab, completely unaware that the next day the lab would have their first real breakthrough in ten months. Queen Narissa had chain interlockages in her magic and had created a new brand upon a forced transmission with Maleficent. The two parts could be unraveled and broken separately. All because a socially awkward young man overheard the conversation of two people with no other options.

Mal returned in June with good, better, and best news. Good news, The Moors wanted to start building a few actual buildings to live in. Better news, donations for the Isle of the Lost had started to come in, and right before the Summer Solstice as well. The best news, three fae people had agreed to journey with her to the Isle of the Lost to help people receive their cards.

Ben met Mal outside in the sunshine as she pulled into the palace circle. Dark sleepless circles were underneath his eyes. She almost tripped getting out of the car to see him because the rot had spread up past her knees this time around. As she kissed her husband and let him hug her a few seconds longer than necessary, she felt something powerful in her chest drawing him closer to her. She closed her eyes and repeated a tiny mantra in her head. "You are in love. You have to tell him. You are in love."

Stewart and Sophia were in love too, which was pretty great even though Mal didn't get to see Sophia as often anymore.

Life was moving onwards and forwards. Mal began to see her life spanned out in front of her as if were a moving picture. She could see the Isle healing and becoming self-sufficient. She could see herself falling in love with Ben over and over, every time she woke up beside him and every time she looked over and caught his gaze. She imagined him with laugh lines and thinning hair and imagined grey streaks appearing in her hair. It didn't seem like a horrible fate. Doug had been right.
She cherished this relationship with her husband.

Maybe one day there would be 'I love you's' that they exchanged, and they'd be together the way married couples were supposed to be, and they'd be truly, truly happy together.

"I missed you," Mal told Ben as three fae women stepped out of the car. Each one had pale green skin and thick green hair pulled back. They wore jackets similar to Mal's in shape but made of leaves and moss, and fern skirts. Clearly naturous fae. "This is Myth, May, and Mercy. They're going to help me on the Isle."

"It's nice to meet you all," Ben said, wrapping an arm around Mal's shoulders. "Thank you for coming. I can help show you all to some rooms where you can stay."

May nodded, and Mal stopped only long enough to pull her suitcase and bag out of the car. By now, she was good at it and had learned to wrap her bag around the handle of the suitcase, so she only had to pull one thing. Myth, May, and Mercy picked up their bags out of the car, each made of moss, and chattered to each other in Faesh as they examined the grounds. Mal occasionally would chime in to point things out to them. The three Fae followed Ben and Mal into the palace, where they were shown to three different ground-level rooms that opened into the gardens. The Fae women seemed very pleased.

Ben snuck Mal's bag from her as she closed the last one of the doors and began to lead the way up to their room. "Anything interesting happen?" Ben asked.

"Yes, actually," Mal nodded. "Those three women are planning on taking architectural ideas back to the moors. They're going to break grounds on palaces, huts, and homes. Everyone is very excited."

"Won't that ruin the forests?" Ben asked, interested as always.

"No. We're building it out of the way, in an area of the moors slightly damaged from the wars against Stephan's kingdom, and underground. They didn't want to lose the natural aspect of the land." Mal explained. It would be fascinating to watch. Certain structures would blend right in with the aboveground, and then underground would be a thriving hub of magic, which they could now afford to build since the moorlands weren't warring with anyone and not dying of toxic magic. "A few people are still upset with Auradon. I actually had to put down a war threat this time around. A few of the spirits that are coming back are pretty angry that I'm allied with you."

"That's not good." Ben frowned. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Stay away from them, probably." Mal yawned a little. "I'm going to keep working on them. Really, I'm what's keeping them from falling into disrepair, so they'll follow me even if they don't like who I'm married to."

Ben stumbled on the steps as he started to black out and Mal caught him with her arm. She couldn't move her wrists very well, but her elbows still worked. "I'm fine, I'm fine." He assured her, yawning. "You going to the Isle soon, then?"

"Tomorrow, hopefully." Mal exhaled. "I'm going to be handing out cards. I hope everything is ready."

"You'll be amazing." Ben chuckled. He reached over and clutched her hand tightly. "I missed you." He told her.

Mal pecked his cheek. "Missed you too."
They reached the door to their suite and Mal led Ben inside to their bedroom. He put her suitcase down and sat back on the bed, immediately closing his eyes. "Shoes." Mal reminded him and wandered over to pick at his laces as he made a defeated sound. She slipped hers off beside the bed. Half of his frame was hanging off the bed. He sat up, dried his shoes and socks off, and then examined her as she plugged her phone in and scrolled through all the messages she'd received on the drive back. "Any strange rumors this month?" She asked, turning and facing him.

"Just the usual." Ben reached over and picked up a lock of her hair. "The fairies grew out your hair again."

"They did." Mal sighed. It was back to being shoulder length, and slightly lighter than it had been before. "Give it another three visits and it'll be back to where it was." She leaned over and trailed her blackened fingers through his hair, watching his eyes drift closed as he sank lower and lower into the mattress.

"You know what sounds nice?" She started.

"What?" Ben hummed, yawning a little in his useless endeavor to stay awake.

"Oh, you and me." Mal started with a smile as a pink blush spread across her cheeks. "Strawberries, and a cheesy hero movie. We could watch Mulan or Giselle. I've heard they're really good."

"Giselle's is funny," Ben mumbled. "You'd probably like her a lot."

"Sweet." Mal hummed, even knowing they'd have to wait for later when he wasn't wiped out and she wasn't 50% rot. "It's a date then?" She asked. There was no answer, though. Ben's breathing had evened out and he was fast asleep on top of the covers, still in a dress shirt and slacks. Mal smiled and rolled over, trying to move her hands a little to see if the black streaks would recede faster. Her eyelids, too, were growing a little heavy. She yawned once, curled up on the bed facing him, and drifted away.

He was gone when she woke up, and so she assumed he had a meeting or had gone to see his parents or something. A little note had been left beside her hand, in nice handwriting and folded in half. 'I got your suitcase for you. Set up your movie and let's see if I can survive staying up late.'

Mal put her shoes in the closet and went to shuffle around in the bathroom for a hair tie. Someone had left some strawberries on her nightstand. Maybe Ben, maybe Sophia. Mal snacked on them as she shuffled through the collection of DVD's that had been permanently residing in their room for the last few months. She pulled two thick blankets out and draped them on the back of the couch for when Ben returned and found Giselle's movie in Ben's collection of Auradon Heroes. As she inserted it into the player, intending to watch the ads and pause at the beginning for later, the door to their room opened. The sound struck Mal as weird because she'd gotten used to knocking. She looked up and saw Lumiere quietly looking around. When he spotted her purple hair peeking up over the couch, his shoulders slumped.

"Ma chère?" He called softly. "You are needed downstairs in the library."

Mal stood up cautiously. "Thank you, Lumiere." She greeted. "Is Ben down there?" She dusted off her knees from where she'd been kneeling.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," Lumiere confirmed. His eyes flitted over Mal, taking in her ponytail, shoeless socks, and hovering especially on her face. The poor man looked… devastated.
Mal reached out carefully. She patted his shoulder awkwardly. "Is… everything okay?" She asked.

Lumiere gave her a weak smile. "We shall see." He whispered. He swung the door open broadly, and Mal couldn't help but feel like there was something foreboding about his tone.

Mal walked ahead of Lumiere all the way down to the library. They passed the Fae in the halls, who waved excitedly to Mal and smiled. When they arrived in the library, the doors were already open. Lumiere followed her in.

Conversation hushed as she entered. Inside was Ben, Belle, Adam, and the Fairy Godmother, all sitting around the same table where Ben had taught Mal to make snowflakes, and where Mal had taken her royals exam thingies. The lights were dimmed in the room as if the palace was trying to make the scene as gloomy as possible. It was stifling. She resisted the urge to wring her hands.

"Here she is," Lumiere announced, despite the fact everyone in the room had seen her as soon as she'd walked in. Fairy Godmother sat in an armchair at the head of the coffee table, with Belle and Adam sitting on her benevolent left, and Ben sitting beside an empty seat on her right. Three of them watched her approach, but Ben did not look up.

"Ah, Mal." Adam greeted as she approached. She held onto the arm of the couch for a few seconds and then dropped into the seat beside Ben. Her husband did not reach for her, and she did not reach for him. Lumiere came to stand near the group, where he folded his arms and bowed his head.

The Fairy Godmother smiled at Mal. "It's lovely to see you again, dearie." She whispered.

"You as well, Ma'am," Mal replied. She looked around and the group. Ben's head was bowed, and his arms set stiffly on his knees. Belle and Adam sat with rigid backs, with their hands clasped together, Belle's in her lap and Adam's against his chin like he was praying. "What is it?" She asked the group.

"We have a matter of some, ah – secrecy, at hand." The Fairy Godmother began. She paused. Silence filled the room once again.

"Which is?" Mal prompted.

The Fairy Godmother shifted uncomfortably. Adam unclasped his hands and wiped his sweaty palms on his slacks. "The spell." He snapped angrily, making Mal jump a little. "Your Mother's curse. They finally figured out how to break it."

"It is broken, actually." The Fairy Godmother explained. "Or rather, scattered. Thomas Maverik loosened it this morning. We've been working on a new lead for about two weeks. We realized that the spell wasn't modeled after Maleficent's magic on other curses because her magic changed after the Unspeakable Punishments. It coupled with Queen Narissa. They used a remnant of one of Narissa's spells and Sleeping Beauty's curse, plus a lot of magnetic magic to pull the two parts away from each other. Then they unwound it from there."

Mal wrinkled her brow. "So... the curse is still there?"

"Yes," Fairy Godmother nodded. "But the effects have been nullified." She glanced at the last of the black streaks in Mal's hands. "Your shadows should recede and then never reappear again."

Mal felt like a ton of bricks had hit her. She couldn't comprehend what this meant. She blinked, locked eyes with the Fairy Godmother, and asked: "I'm free?"

Belle bowed her head and bit her lip. "Yes dear." She choked.
Mal flinched at the queen's despair. She looked at her hands as if they could tell her the answers. Mal felt as if there were signs in front of her, telling her where to go, but she couldn't read any of them.

She took a moment to contemplate her future. What now? Where would she go? She could go down to Auradon city, get an apartment nearer the docks. She could be closer to the Isle and wouldn't have to worry about things like when the palace gates would close or if she'd suddenly suffer any random curse effects. The opportunities were limitless but somehow seemed... dim.

How could she be free, and still feel so trapped?

"Oh." Was all she could say.

A sniffling, sobbing sound came from her right, and she flipped around to see Lumiere cover his face as large, pearly tears began to run down his face. "Excuse me." He said with a dry throat. Mal watched him turn and hurry towards the door. He pulled it shut behind him. She slowly turned back to the group.

"What now?" She asked quietly.

Belle swallowed. "Well, anything you want, I suppose. You can live on the Isle now, or down by the docks. We can make arrangements now to take you off of Auradon's throne and you can make your own decisions for the Isle and for the Moors." She stared at the ceiling, blinking back tears. "And, of course, an annulment and an official statement for Auradon."

"Be mindful of those rumors that have been going around." The Fairy Godmother mumbled. "We don't want to smear your name."

Mal nodded, wiping her hands on her pants. "I think... I can fly to the Moors if I'm careful. I don't technically need to stay in Auradon at all anymore." Her heart felt blackened. "What... what do you think I should do?"

"There are also your kingdoms to think of, Mal." Fairy Godmother reminded her. "You have three moor women currently in the palace. You'd have to move them to the Isle for the next month until they go home. And as for the Isle, you can't reach the palace via cell service yet. It will be harder for you to conduct meetings with the King of Auradon when you don't live with him."

"We can make it work." Mal determined with a hollow tone in her voice before falling back into her chair as the situation suddenly became very, very real to her. She didn't have to stay here. She could have a life outside of the palace, and away from her responsibilities. Just like Sophia and Stewart. Just like she'd wanted ever since she was first announced. But at the same time, nothing was going to be the same. "Is that what you want?" She asked.

Adam hid his face from hers and refused to answer her question. Belle wiped a few stray tears from her cheeks. "We want you to be happy." She told Mal. "That's all that matters to us."

Adam shifted uncomfortably. "We know you didn't come to us under the best circumstances, so we will understand if you want to leave." He said gruffly. He sounded more like his heart was breaking than that he was angry.

Mal turned to Ben, who hadn't said a word on the matter. She opened her mouth but didn't know the question she wanted to ask him. Her heart felt like it was under an awful lot of pressure right now. Her eyes raked over his sandy hair, his tan skin, and her heart clutched in her chest when she saw tears falling from his eyes and onto his legs. She didn't know how to react when people cried.
around her, especially him, and even more especially now that some unfamiliar heat was scorching her eyes and the back of her throat. Ben had only ever cried around her once, and it had been very bad then. She looked away, back out the doors. "Should I… go start getting things together?" She wondered aloud, and immediately, her heart felt like it tried to jump out of her chest and flee away from the horrible, tense scene.

Mal turned back to Ben and rested a hand on his upper arm. Ben stilled. "I don't think I can do it." Tears filled her eyes. Fire swept down her throat. Mal turned to Belle and Adam with shaking shoulders and trembling hands. "I don't want to leave here." She choked out as the tears in her eyes threatened to spill over.

Ben sniffled and looked up at her. His cheeks were red. "Really?" He asked.

Mal nodded. "Please, don't have me leave." She whispered as the first real tear she'd ever cried fell out of her eye and slid down her cheek. Ben reached up to wipe it away. She stopped his hand and threaded her small fingers through his. "I love you." She told him.

The air seemed to thin in the room. It was like a vacuum chamber. Ben wiped the tears from his eyes. "No way." He replied, disbelievingly. "Really?"

Mal didn't even have to think about it as she began to openly sob. "Yeah, I do." She smiled and hiccupsed. "I love you."

Ben started to cry again, and Mal was outright sobbing, feeling ashamed as her face became red. The atmosphere in the room began to lighten, and everyone lifted up like weights were being pulled off their shoulders.

Mal began to laugh as more tears slipped out of her eyes. "I love you." She told Ben. "I love you, I love you, I love you." The words were electric and felt so, so good to hear out loud.

"Stop." Ben chuckled, but there was no heart to his command.

"No." Mal disagreed. "I love you. I want to stay with you. I'm in love with you."

Ben broke down and wrapped his arms around Mal, hugging her frame to him tightly. She put his arms around his neck, sobbing into his chest.

"You'll stay?" Belle asked. Adam couldn't say anything. He was too busy watching the scene pan out before his eyes. Mal nodded through tears, and Belle and Adam began to cry on each other. Even the Fairy Godmother was wiping stressful tears of relief out of her eyes.

Ben leaned back and took Mal's face in his hands. "I love you." He croaked out.

Mal kissed both of his cheeks. "I love you." She responded. He hugged her to his chest, threading his fingers through her hair, and Mal spread her palm out on his sternum. She could feel their heartbeats on either side of her palm, and just like the moment she'd first realized she'd fallen for him, she couldn't tell the difference.

Chapter End Notes

PT1= "No," Ben admitted. "I went to Auradon prep. Graduated at eighteen, and all my friends immediately went to college. But I already knew what I was supposed to be, so
instead of going to college, my parents started training me to run the kingdom. I didn't ever have the opportunity to come and see what college was like. It looks fun." He watched couples walking down the path and imagined what it'd be like to walk around with Mal like that. He could picture them elbowing each other off the path, holding hands, and walking with their arms around each other and their hands in each other's back pockets. It would have been nice to have dated without knowing the imminent.

"They're going to want to go," Jay repeated. "I can already tell this is a place they'd love."

"How so?" Ben asked, pulling one foot up into the seat as he turned his body towards Jay. After a few seconds, Jay turned and met Ben's eyes.

"They act the same way Mal does with you." He said very softly. "Like they have a place, and they don't want to let it go."

PT2=Ben sat on a bench and did work on his tablet while Jay played game after game of tourney on the field. People took sly pictures of him and posted them on social media with captions like: "I think my eyes are lying", "KING BEN", and "someone's missing their queen."
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The Isle is opened.

Chapter Notes

I have planned out the upload schedule all the way to the end (50 chapters plus an epilogue). During the Holiday Season (New Year's and Dec 25th), there will be double chapters. The Epilogue will be released January 1st, 2020 (Gosh, that just worked out great, didn't it?)

Many of you who have been reviewing are aware of what important, game-changing thing is going to happen next chapter. I promise, it'll be a different story after this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

— Pay Attention: Chapter 23, due on Wednesday July 10th, will be released AHEAD OF SCHEDULE on July 8th due to a business trip of mine in which I will be disconnected from Internet —

Life felt like an honest-to-goodness fairytale. Mal knew she belonged exactly where she was, with exactly who she was with.

The day after the curse was broken, she journeyed to the Isle of the Lost with Mercy, May, and Myth accompanying her. The sun was rising over the ocean when they docked and journeyed to the entrance of the city. Mal carried in a bag twenty-nine long sleeves of colorful cards. Mercy and Myth balanced a long table in between their frames and May carried two chairs while Mal carried the last one. Outside the city, people were hovering, wondering if she was going to end up being serious about letting them in. Hats were pulled low over ears and scarves wound tightly across faces, but people rose up as they unfolded the table, propped up the three chairs, and then Mal slowly took out three boxes of cards.

"I'm giving you permission to hand out cards to those who are worthy, to issue my oath exactly as I have it phrased, and to act in my stead until the time you leave to return to the Moorlands," Mal announced as Isle citizens gathered around the barrier, acting as silent, judging witnesses. She repeated her statement in Faesh, effectively binding them and herself to the bargain. She held out her hand as a glowing green orb of magic appeared in her hand. Mercy stretched forward her hand and shook. The magic disappeared into her skin. Mal repeated her words twice more for the other two sisters and then turned to the Islanders outside.

"Who's first?" She asked. A man with long, dark hair falling down his back hesitated and then stepped forward. Mal broke the seal on one box. "This card will be your passage into the city, your apartment key, your right to vote, and your right to all of your possessions." She announced to the crowd, and then dug in her pocket for a fistful of silver tailsmen coins. "These coins will be used to
tie your possessions to your card. Once you have it, hold the card in one hand and pressed the inscribed side of the coin down on your item. It'll add a magical signature reading to your card based on your magical signature, no matter how faint it is, proving that the item is yours. If you don't record it, it can be stolen, and it's not our responsibility. And don't try and steal the coins, because they'll all return to me at the beginning of each day anyway, even if you take them to the rotten part of the Isle." She dropped the handful onto the table and then pulled the top off the box. "Pick a color. This will hopefully be your card for a very, very long time, so pick wisely."

"Can I have a red?" The Isle man asked, and then swallowed nervously. Mal pulled a collection of cards out and let him select a cherry red color. Then she extended her right hand, holding the card in her left.

"Name?" She asked.

"Kamos Strava." The man answered. "I'm a, uh, descendant of a Hunnic soldier."

"Kamos Strava," Mal repeated. "While you are a resident of this city, you are not allowed to participate in any sort of organized crime work, including vandalism, theft, assault or murder. You are at the age to hold a job and therefore are required to help contribute to society. Failure to comply with my terms will result in your inability to continue receiving my protection. Do you agree?"

"What can I do?" Kamos swallowed, looking a little taken aback.

Mal let a little smile play at her lips. "Well, I've got a list." She laughed. "I need distribution people, emergency responders, designers, and organizers. Come talk to me when there's not a line behind you."

A smile spread across Kamos's face. "I agree." He nodded and shook Mal's right hand. The card in her left hand flared and his name and birthdate engraved themselves into the face of the card, near the bottom left corner. Mal smiled and handed him his card.

Kamos examined the card in awe. "I, uh..." he trailed off. "I never knew my birthday." He nodded to her, and whispered "Thank you," and then took a careful step over the barrier. He took a deep breath of the fresh air, closed his eyes, and looked up to the sunshine. Mal reached into her bag and pulled out a binder that was filled with a registrar of all the space she had in her city.

"You're alone, right?" She asked, pulling a pen out even though it wouldn't be needed.

"I am." Kamos agreed, opening his eyes and looking down at her registrar with an amazed expression.

Mal pointed at the first block on the page. "How does room one in building one sound?"

"It... sounds amazing." Kamos breathed. At his agreement, the spot magically blacked itself out and his name appeared in a red color matching his card beside the room number. On the card itself, the inscription 'B1 R1' appeared in the bottom right-hand corner.

"Welcome," Mal smiled and then turned to the next person in line. "Name and color?" She asked. Mercy, Myth, and May all stood up and began to address others in the crowd. Kamos Strava moved out of the way, stepping beyond the wall of the city, and became the first resident of the utopia. Mal, Myth, Mystic, and May worked until past lunchtime when they started switching shifts to eat and because Mal wanted to help oversee people as they come in who were looking for directions. Over one-hundred others were issued cards between her and the three other fae women.
Mal worried at first there would be nothing for them to do while they established homes and territories, but people went right to work. They were each assigned bare apartments, sometimes with roommates, and many hit the paint pans that Mal had asked to be brought to the Isle and left. Before the end of the day, as she walked through the city, she was pleasantly surprised to see many people mingling as the best painters jumped door-to-door and helped to paint rooms and walls. She'd started every card with two-hundred points to help people get on their feet and also to start a common currency. Those who brought Isle coins with them had been given extra points as a sort of exchange rate. Currently, Mal was charging the smallest Isle 'Note' coin as ten points. Those who had been trained with the Auradon construction workers, of course, had been compensated at an equal rate to their Auradonian companions. Speaking of whom, those who'd worked on construction immediately picked up the spare lumber and began to design new buildings they could start building within the next few weeks.

She mostly walked around and lent a hand where she could help. She was more than happy to haul paint, clean brushes, and help the new residents carefully unpack their most treasured items in their rooms. Everything that had been brought into the city was carefully recorded because Mal wasn't going to put up with file claims and 'No, it's not theirs! I just have one like it." The citizens understood that if they didn't clear it with their records, they had no claim on it. Individual property sales were handled as a transfer of assets without any available resources. Everything was sorted underneath a person's card, almost like a virtual storage system but with complex magical readings instead.

She spent the last hour of the day helping people carry things to higher floors. Since she could fly, she technically didn't have to follow the palace's 'seven o'clock rule' anymore, meaning she could stay to help a little longer. As Mal wished the daughter of one of Captain Hook's pirates' good luck and good night, she heard a piercing squeal. She spun around as a small cannon slammed into her, screaming: "Mal!"

"Holy sh-" Mal bit her tongue. A small girl of about twelve had wrapped her paint-stained hands around Mal's waist happily. Two colorful pigtails buried into her chest and a stained apron swished at Mal's ankles. "Dizzy?" She asked.

A freckled face with glasses sitting at a crooked angle appeared. "I can't believe it's you! I missed you so much!" Dizzy exclaimed.

Mal stood rigid for another half second and then wrapped her arms around the small girl. "Oh my goodness." She whispered, eyeing how Dizzy's head was almost neck-level with her. "You got… tall."


Anastasia shifted uncomfortably. "I, uhm, have a card." She held up a purple card with pink streaks. Her name was clearly imprinted. "I'm not looking to cause trouble, it's just-" Anastasia sniffled. "I knew Dizzy wouldn't be able to slip away without an adult, so I'm going to take care of her. Please, don't send me back out." The light that had been in Anastasia's eyes years ago had died. The poor woman was truly broken. Auradon had cut off her heel and sent her away from her husband, even after Cinderella had forgiven her. It seemed she couldn't stop running from her past.

Mal smiled. "No." She said. "Please, stay." She noticed a large red wagon with one absent wheel sitting behind Anastasia. "Are those your things?" She asked.

Anastasia looked over her shoulder at the wagon. "Yes." She said. "We took a few things. We were going to run a salon, just like outside the city. Mom doesn't know we took anything yet." An
awkward silence hung in the air. Mal realized what Anastasia was implying. Lady Tremaine would be furious when she found out.

She nodded. A thought occurred to her. "Do you want me to see if I can find your husband?" She asked.

Anastasia stared at her and looked toward the ground. "I don't know if he'd still want me after all this time." She said sadly.

Dizzy let go of Mal. Mal took two steps forward and set a hand on Anastasia's shoulder. "What was his name?" She asked.

"Rob Paulsen." Anastasia sighed. A small smile graced her lips.

Mal nodded. "I'll find him. After all, I don't know what I would do without my husband, so how can I let you be separate from yours?"

Anastasia's eyes filled with tears. "You're so much like Cinderella." She told Mal. "She was as kind as you are too." Mal laughed, though the sentiment struck an odd chord with her. She was like Cinderella? How interesting. She hadn't met Cinderella yet, so she had no idea what to think of that idea. Most of the heroes she knew only from the complaining of the villains.

"Can I help you find your room?" Mal asked, picking up the handle to the wagon. She noticed Anastasia's hands were red and irritated.

"You don't have to," Anastasia said softly. She wrung her hands. "I think we're just another floor up."

Mal gave the cart an experimental tug. It was very heavy, and about to break. "Ugh." She groaned. She bent down and touched a hand to the side of the wagon. "Take a break; it's feather-weight." She commanded the wagon. Then, as a quick experiment, she focused and said: "Heal the tear, remove the wear, fix it up and repair." The rust peeled off of the wagon as it shook and straightened all its edges. A new wheel formed out of thin air, expertly attaching itself to the other axle.

Dizzy gasped. "Wow!" She cheered and clapped.

"Yeah." Mal agreed. "Beats heavy lifting any day." She picked up the cart, carefully balancing everything inside. "Which room are you?" She asked.

"I-I can take it." Anastasia offered, looking a bit awkward. Mal waved her off.

"Which room?" She repeated.

Anastasia hesitated. "Room 129." She said.

"That's two floors up," Mal informed her. "Good thing I caught you. There are thirty-six rooms on each floor."

Anastasia didn't say anything.

Mal carried the wagon under one arm as she led the way to the stairs at the end of the hall. A plaque beside the stairs informers passers of which floors were on this level. There were five floors in each apartment space. Mal had wanted elevators but had ultimately decided they were too much of an expense for the poor islanders. Since everyone was pretty fit anyways and she could move
those who needed help to lower floors, she decided to wait a few years before she installed them.

"Dizzy, have you seen Evie?" Mal asked as they climbed onto the third floor and started heading for fourth.

"Yes, but she's been busy," Dizzy shrugged as she twisted her apron hem in excitement. "Uma's been really annoying to her ever since you left and her mom wanted her to make her another gown."

"Is she… okay?" Mal asked. She wasn't quite sure how to grace the subject of herself and how her friends talked about her.

"She's okay," Dizzy answered honestly. "She misses you a lot. It sounds like her mom is keeping her busy. She and Maleficent were kind of like bears after you left, but to be honest, Maleficent is kind of dropping off the map. She's been talking about you less and less. I haven't seen her in about five months. Maleficent, the Evil Queen, Cruella De Vil, and Jafar have all gone strangely silent." Dizzy explained.

"That's odd," Mal hummed, setting down the wagon and pulling it along down the hall. "What about Jay and Carlos?"

"I see Jay stealing things," Dizzy admitted. "And Carlos came in with Evie once. But they haven't been coming around as much either. They don't look very healthy either."

Mal looked down at her feet. She'd never forgotten her friends, but she hadn't been thinking about them either. She felt like a rotten person, but how was she supposed to balance Queen of Auradon, Queen of the Moors, Queen of the Isle, Ben's wife and a friend to Sophia, Stewart, Belle, Adam, Elsa, and everyone she knew? She sighed. "I miss them." She confided in Dizzy. "I think I subconsciously left the Isle behind in my head once I had to crack down and start being, y'know, queen and a wife and everything. I feel bad." She twiddled her thumbs.

They stopped outside room 149. Anastasia took two careful steps forward and held out her key with a shaking hand. She waved it in front of the door and waited with bated breath as if she weren't sure it'd work. The lock slid open with an even click, just as Mal had designed it. Dizzy pushed it open as Anastasia stared in shock at the room.

It wasn't a lot since Mal had had to be conservative with her designs, but there were polished wood floors, a little kitchenette, a small family/gathering area, a bathroom, and two small bedrooms. Most of the apartments only had one bedroom, but evidently Anastasia and Dizzy had requested to be together. There wasn't much in the apartment. There were countertops and basic appliances in the kitchen, a mattress in the bedrooms with sheets and some blankets. The bathroom was tiled with running water. Other than that, everything was empty. Anastasia stared at the space with wide eyes as she wandered inside. Mal smiled as she pulled the wagon in behind them.

She pushed the wagon into a corner and pulled out her phone to record Anastasia standing in the middle of the room with tears filling her eyes.

Dizzy hurried to glance inside each of the rooms. "We have beds!" She shouted excitedly. Mal followed her with her camera. "Actual beds with blankets!" Dizzy cheered. "I don't have to sleep under the window by the stairs anymore!"

"All this?" Anastasia asked Mal. "You're giving us all this?"

"Yes," Mal nodded with a smile. "Ben trusted me to heal this land. These are my people. I won't let
him or them down." She stopped the recording and smiled at the signal on her phone. The Isle had service clearance from Auradon now, though wifi was a ways away still. She sent her video to Ben with the caption 'Dizzy and Anastasia'.

"Where do you want everything?" She asked.

Anastasia shook her head. "I… don't even know." She wandered a little further into the living room. "Do we have closets?" She asked excitedly.

"Yes." Mal nodded. "One in here, and one in each of the bedrooms."

Anastasia opened the closet carefully. The smell of freshly dried paint wafted out. Mal smiled as Anastasia closed her eyes. "We can keep them in here until we can start a salon." Anastasia decided. Mal nodded and went back to the wagon. She pulled it towards the closet with nothing more than a squeak. Then, she unloaded the soggy cardboard boxes that all their supplies were being held in and whispered a quiet incantation to fix everything inside. Old paint and rusty utensils became as good as new. She didn't think either Anastasia or Dizzy noticed as they rushed around their new apartment, squealing and taking it all in. It'd be a nice surprise for later on.

"I'm going to go and help the others," Mal told them after a while. "It was nice to see you again."

Dizzy rushed back to Mal and threw her arms around the queen. "Thank you, Mal! This is like a dream come true."

Mal hugged the little girl and rubbed her back a little. "Hey, just wait a few weeks." She promised. "You'll love it even more." Dizzy nodded ecstatically as she withdrew. Mal bent down to be on the younger girl's level. "You'll get your salon up and running, and people will come all over, and you'll finally get to be your own person." Dizzy smiled brightly.

Anastasia walked over, wringing her hands. Mal stood up and they quickly shared a quick hug. "Rob Paulsen?" Mal asked.

Anastasia nodded. "Rob Paulsen." She said. "And thank you, Mal."

"Of course." Mal nodded. She waved and shut the door to room 149 and pulled out her phone. Ben had messaged back.

"Anastasia as in Cinderella?" He asked.

"Yes…" She texted back and paused in her walking to see if he would say anything about how she was letting Anastasia, who had had a life in Auradon between Cinderella's story and the Isle and who had apologized to Cinderella and managed to repair her relationship, back into the city.

"Okay." He texted. Mal smirked. The boy could be taught.

Mal walked out in the light of the setting sun and stopped dead in her tracks. Outside the apartments, a group of about twenty young children were bouncing spinning lights back and forth off their ankles and out of their hands. Others were conjuring them in their palms and looking amazed at the bright, fluorescent colors. It took Mal a moment to realize what she was witnessing. These were magic-possessing children testing out their strengths for the first time. Mal smiled and slipped behind a building. With a little focus, she was able to grow her wings out. She gave them a little stretch and then focused on lifting off. It took a little work, but her wings were strong and capable. She floated into the air, a little unsteady, and then more sure of herself. As she flew into the open, people yelled in surprise. "It's Mal!" Someone called.
Mal flew up to the wall and hovered on the edge before she settled down with her edges facing the rest of the Isle. Few lights were lit against the darkening sky. She kicked her legs back and forth, imagining who could be over there. Jay, Evie, Carlos, Uma, Harry, everyone. Her mother.

Mal wondered what her mother was up to. It wasn't out of the ordinary for her to disappear every so often, but for so long? Something must be cooking in Maleficent's head.

Over by the gates, long lines stretched out into the forest. Citizens slipped through the crowds of incoming people and entered the city barrier without any problems whatsoever. Mal smiled and stood back up. She fluttered down and put her hand down on Myth's shoulder. "It's getting late, ladies. We may need to wrap it up and leave it till tomorrow."

May looked up. "There are still people out." She said.

Mal nodded. "They can come in and out if they have cards. And we can come back tomorrow. I need to go back to the palace though for tonight."

The three women exchanged looks. "If you don't mind, your majesty, can we stay the night? We'll still be here in the morning."

Mal blinked. "Well, sure, if you want. You guys can probably crash in one of the family homes so long as everything is cleaned afterward. Will you be okay?"

Myth nodded and shook a young lady's hand. A bright yellow card was held aloft in her other hand. A bright glow appeared where their hands connected. Then Myth smiled at the girl. "Building 4, room 174. It's at the top." She handed the girl her card and turned to Mal. "We'll be fine. Go home and tell King Ben hi from us."

Mal nodded. She smiled at the group of people waiting patiently for a card and picked up an electric blue card out of a pile of blanks. "Hey." She said gently. "Is electric blue okay?"

The person smiled shyly. "Actually, can I have green? Green helps stimulate my mind. It's a creative color."

"Of course." Mal nodded, shuffling around until she found a lime green. "Is this okay, or would you like a darker shade?"

"No, that's fine." The person crept forward a little more. It was a girl with a half-shaved hairstyle. Her hair was brown with green streaks in it.

"Name?" Mal asked, holding the card in her left hand and holding out her right hand.

"Eliza Deavor?" The girl took her hand.

"While in garrison in the city, you cannot steal, rob, any sort of crime for any reason," Mal warned. "There will be consequences depending on severity. Also, you're required to contribute to society. We want everyone old enough to have jobs to support themselves, whether you're working for government infrastructure or starting anything independently."

Eliza Deavor hesitated. "Do you… have any need for a record keeper? With everything coming in and out of the city, that is."

Mal was surprised. She thought for a moment on everything she'd need to start keeping track of. "Actually, I might have a place for you if you like." She admitted.
Eliza nodded. "Yeah, I'd like to do that. See, my mom was big on putting things together and she was an excellent designer. She designed ships, and planes, tons of cool stuff. And..." Eliza's face fell a little and she became unsure of herself.

Mal nodded. "The screenslaver." She finished for Eliza. The poor girl was probably used to telling people and it was clear she wasn't sure if she should be mentioning it now. "I remember all about the lesson on your mom from Dragon Hall. Well, welcome to the city." She shook Eliza's hand and a bright glow materialized from where their hands touched. Mal handed Eliza her card. She glanced over Myth's shoulder at a catalog of available rooms. "How does room fifty-two sound in building two? It's right over there, on the second floor." Mal pointed.

"Sounds... great." Eliza sounded amazed. Her new address appeared under her name as she spoke, and the catalog Mal had just read off of blacked out the now-filled room.

"Anything you're bringing into the city, even clothes, you'll probably want to check over there. Just scan the item using the magic coin there while holding your card. It'll register your possessions, so if they're stolen, you can hold us accountable to get it back. Got it?" Mal asked, pointing to a table where several people were holding silver coins and pressing them onto stuffed dolls and extra clothes.

"Yeah." Eliza let out a breath. "Hey, can I feel your wings?" She asked, pointing at Mal's wings, which were still hanging loosely off her back.

"Sure." Mal stepped away and turned carefully, lifting her wings so Eliza could run her fingers through the feathers. The feeling still felt strange, but the more she wore them and used them, the less sensitive they became.

"Wow," Eliza muttered. She stepped away. "Thank you, so much Queen Mal. I swear I'll make you proud." She hurried away to the table, leaving Mal to chuckle. She watched people carefully scan nearly-broken items, and her heartstrings got the better of her. She walked over to the table behind Eliza.

"Excuse me?" She called to those surrounding the table. "I can try to fix your possessions if you like. But I can't be here for very long. If you have things you want me to fix, please bring them here."

People looked up and exchanged glances in the dark. Someone held up a ragged blanket. "Can you... fix this?" He asked. Mal gestured for him to bring it forward.

She spread it out across her knees and placed both hands on it. "Heal the tear, remove the wear, fix it up and repair." She commanded it. A green glow lit up the area. The blanket grew twice its size and began to patch itself. When the light faded, the owner gasped.

"It's better than when I got it!" He exclaimed. "Thank you!"

"Of course," Mal nodded, feeling a bit tired. "Who's next?"

People crowded around her, holding their favorite keepsakes. There were pretty plaited hats, ragged shoes, and coats. A young ten-year-old cradled a ragged doll as an older sister clutched at a well-loved math tome. Mal set straight to work, repairing and cleaning all that she could. People brought all sorts of items that were precious to them. Mal fixed them all until the sun had nearly gone done and she was starting to wear out her magical core.

"I can't do any more after this." She announced with a deep breath as a very, very young mother of
twenty years old brought her three-year-old son forward. His socks had been worn into netting, and his shoes had disconnected from the sole. She'd tried to paste them together with duct tape to no avail. "But I'll be back tomorrow, and there are other magical people in the city who may be willing to help me." She pressed her hands to the little boy's stone-cold toes. "Heal the tear, remove the wear, fix it up and repair." She said. New socks wove his way over his tiny feet before the shoes stitched themselves up. New material grew in the place of worn, ripped, and lost, and they even grew a little to fit his feet. Mal wiped her brow.

"I'm sorry, but I really need to go now." She told the crowd. "Please, go and have a good night's rest. I'll see you all tomorrow."

People retreated. Mal got to her knees shakily. "I'm sorry, but I can't do any more for a little bit." She told the people who hung around. They nodded and retreated sadly. More new citizens were still flooding through the entrance. The three Fae sat at their posts, patiently explaining everything to the newcomers. Mal was so grateful for them. She'd never have had the strength to do this all herself.

A boat was waiting down on the pier to take her home. She climbed on and slumped into a chair. "Home soon." She thought. It was seven o'clock, and the palace closed at nine. She needed to hurry, or she'd be locked out.

She yawned and brought out her phone to call Ben as the boat undocked and began to move through the ocean.

"Hey." He said when he picked up.

"Hey Honey." She teased. "I'm on my way now. You still up?"

"It's only seven." Ben laughed. "You sound tired."

"I just performed about a million magical acts of goodness." Mal yawned, rubbing her forehead. "Wait up for me?"

"Of course." Ben laughed, and there was the sound of papers shuffling around. "Hey, Mal, can you take Sunday off?"

"What's Sunday?" Mal asked with a frown.

"I have a surprise planned." He admitted.

"Oh no." Mal rolled her eyes. "Should I be worried?"

"Ha, ha." He laughed. "Can you?"

Mal sighed. "I dunno Ben. I'm really busy with the Isle. Can it wait?"

"Sorry, no, it can't. It's already waited too long." Ben said. "You don't even realize how hard it is to do things without you finding out."

"Guess that's what happens when you're involved with everything." Mal sighed. "Okay. I'll see what I can do. But Ben, I really can't be away too much. We're in a very delicate position on the Isle."

"I get it, I get it." Ben laughed. "It'll be worth it."
"Mph." Mal yawned. "You should have waited until I wasn't tired to ask me. Then I could have pretended to be excited."

Ben laughed. "It's fine." He assured her. "I love you anyway."

Mal smiled and cradled the phone closer to her ear. "I love you too." She whispered. "Be home soon."

"Bye Mal."

"Bye Ben."

She hung up and went to stand at the head of the boat as the waves crashed against the hull. She stared down into the water and thought she saw something zoom by, but when she looked up there was only the barrier separating her from Auradon, her third home.

The next morning, when Mal woke up, Ben was already up and in the closet, pulling on a shirt. Mal watched him straighten it out on his torso, yawned, and got to her feet. "Morning." She said as she wandered towards her own closet and began to search for a long shirt.

"Morning," Ben said. He turned around as he pulled a pair of tennis shoes off a shelf. "Nice to see you." He smiled.

Mal examined his outfit. He was wearing a polo shirt, blue jeans, and had a baseball cap tucked under his arm. Mal raised an eyebrow. "Are you planning on doing yard work or something today?" She asked as she found a pair of black jeans with rips and patches on the knees.

Ben sat down on the bed to tie his shoes. "I was hoping you'd let me tag along to the Isle." He said casually. "Is that okay?"

Mal snorted. "Now that you're already dressed and almost ready to go, sure. But you're not going to be able to sit around all day. Everyone's hard at work there."

Ben rolled his eyes. "Yes, because I'm getting dressed to stand around and watch everyone else work." Mal laughed as she grabbed her own pair of tennis shoes and went to sit beside him as they loosened laces and pulled their shoes on. Ben finished his as she was tying her second shoe, and when she put her foot on the ground, took her hand. She squeezed his hand, and then stood up.

"I need to brush my teeth." She said, slipping towards the bathroom. "Do you need to take anything with you? It's a two-hour trip."

"Want to watch a movie?" Ben asked.

Mal pictured the long car drive down to the pier to take the boat to the Isle. Truth be told, she'd rather not watch a movie, which was surprising because she did genuinely enjoy watching all the old Auradon heroes. But movies were for winding down, and Mal felt extremely awake.

"Not really," Mal admitted. "I'd rather just…" She pursed her lips in thought. "Talk with you. Catch up. Like, do you remember when I first came to Auradon and we'd climb the roof and just talk? We should do that. I just want to talk to you."

Ben chuckled and looked at his hands. "I'll bring a few decks of cards." He decided. "Even if we don't end up using them in the car, I'm sure the kids on the Isle would love to have a few packs to play with."
"Sounds good." Mal nodded. She hurried to brush her teeth, and then picked up her travel bag off the floor by the door where she'd dropped it the night before. "Just a forewarning, I will probably be performing more magic all day today that you've ever seen me use before, even when you were at the Moors."

"Cool," Ben said. "I can't wait."

Mal stopped in the doorway and turned to look at him. "You know what?" She said, drawing his attention. "You're really cool. I mean, for someone who was raised away from magic, thank you for being so open with me. It means a lot."

"Of course." Ben smiled. "Now, are you ready to head out?"

"More than ready." She smiled. "Come on, I have a kingdom that needs me."

Stewart drove them down to the dock again. As they pulled up, Mal noticed a crowd of people standing near her boat with lots of equipment. "Hm." She hummed. "That's new. I wonder who they are."

"Camera crews." Ben sighed. "Want to place a bet they're going to ask to come with?"

Mal sighed. "Should I let them?" She asked.

"It's up to you. Does the island need the publicity?" Ben asked.

Mal shrugged. "So-so. Alright, I think I'll let them tag along, but if they're annoying, there won't be a second time." She picked his baseball cap off the leather seat where he'd left it and put it on his head. He laughed at her.

They opened the car door. As soon as the camera crews spotted them, they began to head towards her. Mal ignored them as she went to the passenger-side window and thanked Stewart for driving them. He wished her luck on the Isle as always, and then drove off.

"Excuse me, your highnesses." One of the reporters said as they approached. "We wanted to ask for permission to journey with you to the Isle of the Lost. We want to gain footage of the inhabitants."

Mal eyed them up and down. "You're to ask everyone you film or photograph beforehand if it's alright. Also, don't try to tell me how to run my kingdom, or I'll get a little testy. Understood?"

A few of the reporters nodded. They were heavy-laden with notepads, pencils, and cameras, which they carried onto the boat and set carefully out of the way of the sailors. Mal sat down beside Ben, who tightened the strap on his hat to make sure it wouldn't be lost in the ocean wind and then pulled out a pair of sunglasses as he looked out over the waves. One of the braver reporters sat a little ways away from Mal and turned her knees towards the young Queen as she cleared her throat. "Do you have any jokes today?"

Mal smirked a little. "Is that what I am? The resident satirical jokester?"

"Yes." Ben nodded, rolling his eyes. "When God created you, he said 'let there be beauty, let there be magic, and let there be an abundance of sarcasm and jokes.'"

Mal laughed. "And when God created you, he said 'let there be kindness, let there be an overwhelming obsession with magic, and let there be way, way too much fascination with Big Hero Six.'"
"That's a great movie!" Ben protested. "I don't know why you laugh at me for wanting to watch it so much. It has wicked music, awesome animation, it talks about going to school and inventing things, it treats mental illness like a real thing, it's fantastic."

"How does Hiro Hamada like his food?" Mal asked, turning back to the reporter. "Microwaved."

Ben put a hand over her face as if that would stop her from talking. She licked his finger and he jumped his hand back, wrinkling his nose up, and shoved her playfully. The reporter laughed and inched closer. "Is it okay if I ask both of you a question?" She asked.

"Strike one," Mal replied, spiking an eyebrow at Ben before turning back.

"Do I get three strikes?" The reporter asked.

"Strike two." Mal nodded.

"How long do you see yourselves staying the way you are now?" The reporter asked, rolling her eyes a little bit and smiling.

Mal leaned back into Ben and looked up at him, humming. "A long time." She decided. "A long, long time."

"I hope we're still like this when we're old." Ben nodded, pausing to lean his chin on her head. "I want it to be like this until the day I die." Mal made a face at his cheesy line as the reporter smiled and scribbled a few notes down without looking at her notepad.

"And how long do you think it'll take before the Isle becomes a functioning country?" She asked, clicking her pen a little.

"Strike three is passed." Mal shook her head. "Let's just enjoy the boat ride. Maybe we'll answer more on the way home." She leaned her head back over the railing of the boat and let the wind whip through her locks. The reporter sighed but didn't press as she turned back to her peers and began to inscribe what she'd witnessed. Mal listened to the sounds of the ship as they disembarked and began to move into open water, across the Sea of Division. Most of the crew stayed above deck. The weather was nice, and the salty spray made their faces feel cool and sticky.

Finally, the ship docked at the Isle. They had to moor several tens of meters down the bay area because the water was full of people. Children who had been surrounded by water their entire lives were now out in the ocean, swimming under the hot sun. Faces that had never been clean before were squinting at the boat. One of the cameramen began to unpack his camera as the rest of the crew followed Ben and Mal off the gangplank.

"It's Mal!" Someone yelled in the water.

"Hi, Queen Mal!" Someone called.

Mal waved. "Hi, guys! How's the water?"

No one answered as they all climbed out. Most of them were still in their day clothes. Already, Mal saw lighter colors taking precedence among the black. It made sense that they'd want less skin-tight and black to keep them cool instead of the classic Isle-garb that both looked edgy and kept them warm.

Ben dropped an arm around Mal's shoulders as people came up to meet them. He held out a relaxed fist to bump knuckles with the younger kids. Many people crossed their arms and took up guarded
stances as they recognized him. "I brought some people over today," Mal informed everyone. "I hope you guys don't mind."

A couple of the Islanders gave careful looks to the camera crews, and to Ben. Mal smiled and set a hand on her husband's shoulders. "This is my husband. He's going to be helping out today. And these are some people from Auradon who want to take photos and videos of the Isle and of you guys. I told them they had to get permission from everyone who is in the photos first."

There were uncomfortable shifts in the small crowd, but Mal remained tall. "If you don't want to be photographed, go about your business but please stay out of their way as much as possible. They've got things to do too. Now, I'm going to head over to check on the ladies who were helping people into the city, and then I'll be back to help fix things." People smiled and began to whisper excitedly. A couple of kids broke off from the group and sprinted away towards the apartment buildings to grab things.

The group let Mal through as she passed. She headed over to a gate. No one was checking in at the moment, and only Mercy was sitting at the gate. People wandered in and out, bringing things from the Isle. It occurred to Mal she had no way to prevent citizens from stealing off of islanders and bringing their things inside. She'd have to bounce ideas off of Ben later.

"Is everything alright?" She asked Mercy, who was growing live ivy out of the back of her hand and then making it disappear again.

"All is well." Mercy hummed. "It's nice to have you back, your highness." Mercy dipped her head towards Mal, and then Ben. "About fifty more people came in from the Isle last night. We refused access to ten on account of needing your judgment. Drizella Tremaine, Hans of the Southern Isles, and your mother, Maleficent, among others."

Mal felt her heart sink back into her chest. "Okay." She sighed. Ben set a hand on her shoulder blade comfortingly. "How many villains have been allowed inside?" Mal asked as she reached over her shoulder to pat his hand.

"Evelyn Deavor, Eliza's mother. Michael Yagoobian. And Robert Callahan." Mercy said, growing a little tree out of four of her fingers.

Mal glanced over her shoulder at Ben. "Your favorite villain." She told Ben, who snorted.

"Hardly." He replied. "Is Gaston here?"

"No. He shouldn't be." Mal looked to Mercy. "Have you let Gaston in? A large man, handsome, rugged type. A little more grey in his hair than black?"

"No." Mercy shook her hand.

"Are we starting a prohibited list?" A voice came from behind Mal. She turned around to see Eliza Deavor and her mother.

"I don't know." Mal sighed. "I don't want Gaston in because I know his reputation, and I don't know how powerful my mom is compared to me." She bit her lip. "This isn't really a second-chance based thing – it's for those who were born to those imprisoned here. I'm okay with letting people who learned their lesson in but for the people who are just going to make things difficult... I need to draw a line somewhere."

"We've been allowing people based on remorse and personal conviction." Mercy explained. "Magically speaking, we can sense intent. I'm the best of my kind, being mercy, which is why I'm
here at the gates. My sisters decided to put some minor plant life around your small city, by the way. We decided if there was any sort of retribution in their spirit, we’d ask they leave." She stepped up and pointed a finger at Evelyn, who shrank a little at her imposing force. "We questioned you based on your ambitions, but ultimately let you through."

Mal nodded. "I think I can do that if I concentrate enough. I'll start doing that now. Are things slowing down, then?"

"Only barely." Mercy nodded. "The last person came through only five minutes ago. There are about three-hundred people inside now. They usually come in bursts of about twenty or thirty."

Mal nodded. "People are probably waiting to see if the word is all we've said it is." She hesitated. "Mercy, there are three other people I'm concerned about. Their names are Carlos, Jay, and Evie. Son of Cruella, son of Jafar and daughter of the Evil Queen. Have they come through at all?" Ben, upon hearing this question, crossed his arms and examined Mercy's expression.

"I wouldn't know." Mercy shook her head. "What do they look like?"

Mal began to wring her hands as she thought. "Evie has blue hair, and they all wear jackets similar to mine. Carlos-"

"No." Mercy interrupted. "I'm sorry, no."

"Oh." Mal wilted. "Okay. Thank you." She set a hand on Mercy's shoulder. "I'm going to go help out around the city now if that's okay. Did you say your sisters were creating plant life?"

"Flowers." Mercy said offhandedly. "Trees away from the buildings for the children to climb on."

"You should get a playground," Ben advised. Mal blinked at him. "It's an area with large toys for kids to play on, basically." Ben rolled his eyes. "I'll take you to one in Auradon so you can get ideas. I have a feeling you'll like the climbing structures."

Mal shrugged. "Sure." She sighed. "Let's put that on the agenda for the next day we both consecutively have a free day." Ben laughed.

"Thanks, Mercy," Mal said, turning away as the Fae began to grow a small pistachio tree on her fingernail. She looked at Eliza and Evelyn as the two began to follow her towards the nearby buildings. "How can I help you two?" She asked.

"Mom and I were hoping to be, like your assistants, as a job. We're good at keeping records and designing new things. If you give us a chance, I think we could really shine." Eliza explained, twisting her hands.

Mal blinked. "Actually, that would be really, really helpful. Then I wouldn't have to do everything myself."

"Are you ever going to set up a council?" Ben asked. "That way you wouldn't have to travel around and you could divide responsibilities a little bit."

Mal hummed in thought. "Yeah, that sounds nice. Maybe one day. She stopped. "What I'm trying to accomplish now is helping everyone get settled in. Then, I'll help everyone set up businesses and jobs, including schools. Then, we'll start working to pay back Ben's country for all the loans they gave me to build this, and from there I'll put special effort into what the citizens want. We'll create councils which can raise ideas. Everyone, anyone with a card over sixteen, will have the opportunity to vote. Then I'll start making your dreams a reality. Do you like that idea?"
Evelyn and Eliza both locked gazes and nodded as if Mal's ideas made sense. Mal glanced at Ben and saw him nodding along to her words. "What about a justice system?" Evelyn asked.

"I am the justice system," Mal decided. "At least until we get going. Then, you guys can decide what you want to happen to the criminals around you. If you can't decide, I'll take over."

"I don't know if you want to do that." Eliza laughed. "Everyone is really, really against the idea of evil right now. You gave us all a chance to prove we can be good, and now we're all out to prove how much we hate evil." Evelyn snorted and started nodding, and Mal glanced back at Ben a little. Against evil. Hmm.

"Okay." Evelyn trailed off. "But, how can we hold you accountable for taking care of us?"

Mal shrugged. "I'm here, aren't I? If I do something wrong, let me know and I'll try to fix it. One day soon, it won't be so much 'I say, you do.'"

Evelyn looked a little skeptical, but Eliza nodded. "It must be hard to draw the line on an island of villains and criminals."

Mal sighed. "It is, but I won't let the innocent rot. Where do you think you should start first?"

Evelyn opened her mouth, but Eliza started talking before her mom could even take an opening breath. "Definitely start with taking records of who's in the city, because as soon as people start having children, we'll have the same problem as before on the Isle. Also, we should have paper records for non-magicals and magicals alike to make sure their possessions have been recorded, and we need to start hunting down people who can teach trade skills. And maybe we should like about registering people who have magical powers but I don't know how necessary that would be. We need to get people who can help upkeep the areas and people who can help in emergencies and-

"Woah," Mal interrupted. "I love your ideas, but you'll wear yourself out if you do that much at once. If I got you a computer to work on, would that help you out?"

Eliza nodded shyly.

"Kay," Mal said. "I'll get you and your mom a tablet with a keyboard because they're more portable anyway. Here-" She pulled a notebook and a pen out of her travel bag. "I think this is brand-new." She flipped through the book. "Yup. Here, you can have this to scribble ideas down, if you want."

Eliza took the book with a smile. "Thank you, Queen Mal." She said.

"Just Mal." Mal waved as she began to walk towards the buildings. People were gathering with broken items, waiting for her. "I've got to go help these people now. Take a break and enjoy the sunshine. I'll get back to you. Have a nice day." Eliza and her mother waved goodbye as Ben and Mal headed to the crowd gathered.

About thirty people were gathering with battered, torn objects in their hands of next to them. Right off the cuff, Mal could see tables, chairs, mirrors, toys, coats, blankets, all manner of utensils. People ranging from eight to older ages of fifty and sixty, some with dirty faces and all with pale, sallow skin watched with rapt attention as she hurried toward them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Mal said.

"Queen Mal?" A large man with broad shoulders asked with a dry throat. "We heard you can heal
broken items."

Mal shrugged. "Well, I seem to be pretty talented at it lately. The Isle, the Moors, etc."

"Can you fix our things?" A tall woman said as she held a battered jewelry box in her thin hands.

"Sure." Mal shrugged. She held out her hands and the woman carefully placed her box in them. As Mal spoke the incantation, the box lit up and mended itself. Parts of the wood that weren't even present and which had been lost were suddenly summoned into existence. She handed the box to the woman, who began to tear up and shake.

"Thank you." She whispered as tears fell out of her eyes and began to stain her cheeks through the dirt under her eyes.

"Absolutely no problem." She said, even as she watched the Auradon Reporters creep closer. This would be the first time that Auradon would see her use magic. She hoped that no one would be angry at Ben for standing by and not condoning her as a small woman brought forward a small table with a broken, duct-taped fourth leg and set it at her feet.

By the time she'd fixed that table, a small necklace, and an old, broken coffee machine, the reporters had spotted her. They were silent as they crept forward. One man had a rather large camera slung up on top of his left shoulder. They readied it. Mal wasn't sure if they'd already seen her performing magic, but she decided to give them a show. She pulled a small girl with dull blue eyes and grey cheeks out of the crowd. Her fingers were wrapped tightly in bandages and she held a small, dirty bird in her hands that once upon a time might have been blue. Mal took the bird from the little girl's hand's carefully and uttered her healing incantation. One of the reporters let out a little breath as she handed the bird to the girl before she took her hands. "To see you whole is my only goal; I give you hands to help me heal these lands."

It was the first time Mal had tried a healing spell, and she wasn't surprised when she immediately felt tired. As the bandages unraveled, Mal caught evidence of scar tissue and dead skin clinging to the wounds. Green light quickly patched up the lacerations. Mal let a smile stretch across her face as she watched that little girl's face turn from sheer happiness to amazement-stricken awe. She carefully turned her hands one way, and then the other. She flexed her fingers to feel the muscles move. She used one hand to gently prod the other and then looked up at Mal in utter shock.

The girl flung herself forward into Mal's arms for a hug before she stepped back and picked up her toy bird with silent tears forming in her eyes. She pushed a little lever with one finger and watched the wings move up and down, just like it was flying.

Ben let out a breath behind her. "Wow." He whispered. "I wish I could do that."

Mal laughed. "I can't do many more of those, or I'll pass out from over-use."

A teenaged boy whistled. "Maybe your kids will be able to do that. That'd be cool."

A girl about four inches shorter than the boy punched him in the arm. "No, stupid." She said. "Queen Mal can't have kids. They said so on TV."

Mal raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I can." She corrected.

"Really?" The girl asked.

Mal hesitated. "Well, actually, I haven't tried. But if I don't know, there's no way anyone else could know, so you might as well forget that rumor." She reached for a tattered shirt and returned to
healing things as people talked around her.

After about thirty minutes, most everything had been healed and Mal was exhausted. She sat on the ground and took short breaks in between every spell. Finally, Ben put a hand on her shoulder. "That's enough." He told her. You'll wear yourself out. Time to rest a little."

Even though there were only ten more people with old items in their hands, Mal knew he was right. "I'm sorry." She told everyone. "I need to rest, or I'll pass out or seriously hurt myself. Please, come find me later and I'll finish as much as I can."

Everyone nodded their heads and hurried to their new homes with their possessions. Ben leaned down and took hold, one hand on her back and the other on her arm, on her to help her up. As she put her feet on the ground and started to get to her feet, a pair of black boots stopped in her field of vision. She stood up and found herself still overshadowed by a man with silver piercings and blue ink curling around his ear. She recognized him as someone she'd personally given a card to the day before.

"Can I help you?" Mal asked slowly, examining the hostile stance he had taken up. She crossed her arms and shifted her weight to put Ben at her side. He put his hands in his pockets and smiled at the man.

"How strong are you really?" The man asked, fists tightening into balls.

Mal narrowed her eyes. "Why do you need to know?" She asked.

"What's the worst you could do?" The man demanded. "If I decided that I wanted to bust down one of your doors to those buildings over there and take it for myself, how're you going to stop me?"

Mal's eyes flashed. "I'll send you out in chains." She decided. "I worked too hard for punks like you to mess everything up."

The man lunged left at a passerby and snatched a book out of their hands. He made to tear it in half threateningly, and people yelled around them. Mal braced her hands and her fists erupted into fire, but before she could do anything someone in a black vest and coat had tackled him to the ground. Three other men and two women pounced on the thug, ripping the book out of his hands and pulling their head back, exposing his neck. Mal let her fists fizzle out in shock as she watched the five angry citizens.

"Woah!" Ben exclaimed. "Guys, guys, calm down!"

Immediately, all five looked up in shock at the two leaders. "He was gonna hurt their book! He stole!" One of the women, who had a nose ring and cornrows in her hair, protested.

"We don't want no crime here!" One of the men protested, bracing a fist behind his head like he was about to punch the thug in the face. "You give it up at the gate or you go back because we're sick of fighting for scraps!"

"If I'm gonna fight for something, I'm gonna fight to never go back to the Isle again." The second woman hissed. "You don't get to bring that over here."

"Right, of course." Mal nodded immediately. Her eyes were wide, and she could feel how dry her mouth had gone. "We're not bringing crime over here. But… could you please get off him for a second? I think he was just trying to prove a point."

Slowly, the five got up, carefully releasing his head while they continued sending him devilish
looks. They brushed themselves off and cracked their knuckles while the original thug sat up slowly, glaring around menacingly. He squinted up at Mal. "You're serious about this then?" He demanded. "No crime, no stealing, no evil. You actually expect us to leave it all at the gate like it was never a part of us?"

"I expect effort." Mal narrowed her eyes. "This isn't an opportunity to bring evil to a new place. It's a chance to escape poverty and receive a fair chance. Emphasis on fair. For everyone. I won't allow gang activity or evil here."

"I thought you were Maleficent's daughter?" The man screwed up his face. "I thought you were just sayin' all that crap."

Mal shook her head and the man tightened his fists even more. He glanced around at the hostile gazes of those around him – the people who'd snatched the book back, the disapproving citizens who clearly agreed with those who'd launched out, and the King and Queen themselves. Then he dug into his pocket and withdrew a dark violet card. He extended it to her with a scowl. "I don't want any of your goodness crap. If I have to be good here, I don't want a place."

Mal took the card back. His name vanished off of it and it became a blank card. Mal swallowed. "You have fifteen minutes to collect your things before the barrier ejects you. Once you leave, you can't return without receiving another card. If you attempt to break any of my rules before you leave, you will be immediately ejected with none of your belongings returned."

The man walked right in between her and Ben, elbowing them both aside as he headed directly for the exit. No one said a word as they watched him hit the gateway to the rotten part of the Isle and disappear from view. Mal's fingers felt icy.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder with an electric blue card. Two people who were dressed similarly to the man who'd just left extended their cards out to her, looking sullen. Mal took both cards, watched the names disappear, and then watched them follow what she assumed was their gang leader out of the city. One person with the same blue tattoo curling along their hairline watched them go, hands deep in their pockets, and then turned away. They would be the only member of the group to stay.

Ben put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay." He whispered.

Mal nodded and looked at the blank card in her hand with a heavy sigh. "It won't happen again." She decided. "I'm going to check people's intentions as they come in like Mercy suggested." She exhaled and straightened up. "I want to decorate the entrance with these, actually. Come on, we'll seal all the others into the walls to keep people from trying to sneak them."

"Actually, I'm going to see if anyone needs any help carrying things up." Ben decided. He kissed her cheek. "Can I text you?"

"Of course." Mal nodded with a smile. "We'll catch up later."

"We will." Ben agreed and turned away to walk closer to the buildings, looking for people to help. Mal went the other direction, where she could see a group of people waiting to receive cards. Now seemed like as good a time as ever to pick up on Mercy's skills.

I have planned out the upload schedule all the way to the end (50 chapters plus an epilogue). See chapter notes for more details.
I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, Mulan, Cinderella, Snow White and the seven Dwarves, Aladdin, 101 Dalmanations, Frozen, the Little Mermaid, Peter Pan, The Incredibles 1 and 2, Big Hero 6, or Meet the Robinsons.
Chapter Summary

Mal's friends are brought from the Isle of the Lost. Mal sets her life straight with them. An Intermission occurs in the story. The Sea Monster is sighted again, and the barrier over the Moorlands is unintentionally attacked. Ericka and Jessie's dad is revealed (Confirmed, for some of you.) MAJOR SPOILER - In Belle's dialogue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Who's ready to start a war? Me!

Another cold wind whipped around the edge of a building, carrying the smell of fish straight into her face. Mal winced, wrinkling her nose, and shivered a little. She wished she'd brought more than just her Isle Jacket.

"What are we doing here?" Mal grumbled for the fourth time. They were sitting on a pier looking out over the Auradon bay, located just outside of Oceana, where Ariel and Eric lived. Mal could even see the clouds over the Isle of the Lost if she craned her head around the suburban-type car Ben had insisted they take instead of his/her little five-seater car, though they were so far away they looked to be about the size of a pinprick.

Normally, Mal wouldn't complain nearly as much about Ben's surprises, but this one apparently involved her sitting on a pier with the collars on her Isle jacket turned up for extra warmth for thirty minutes while she flipped through the news app on her phone.

Not that the news was particularly disinteresting. If anything, it was pretty good news. "Queen Mal Heals Isle", "Magical Queen Hard at Work", and "King Ben, I Wish I Could Do That," The footage the crew had caught was wonderful, and Mal was happy she'd let them go. Those who didn't want to be photographed were omitted or blurred, and those who had given permission had made for beautiful, striking photos. Mal herself was featured among many of them. There were pictures of her healing, lifting a bed-frame into a new resident's home minutes after she'd fixed it. There was her and Ben tag-team lifting a young man, who was looking very surprised as they all stared at the camera. The most striking photos were that of the new residents themselves, with faces lit up and smiles alight as they treasured the first glances of new homes, of whole body parts, or of healed possessions. Auradon's hearts were melting.

Mal put her phone away and pulled her jacket closer around her frame. "Isn't it supposed to be warm in June?" She grumbled as she held a hand closer to her mouth to catch her warmer breath.

"The dock doesn't get much sun," Ben explained. He, too, was on his phone, quietly looking at the castle website and occasionally glancing at his watch.

Mal huffed. "What are we waiting for anyway? We're wasting time. I could be out on the Isle right now." Ben rolled his eyes at her complaining.
"Just sit." He sighed, pulling out his watch to glance at the hands. "They must be running late."

"I don't even know why we're waiting." Mal murmured. She picked at the peeling paint of the rusted beam she was sitting on and gave Ben a pointed look. Ben let out a dejected sigh. It was clear Mal's complaining was starting to grate on him, so Mal tried to bite her tongue.

The wharf was freezing, and the smell of fish and the humid salty air was simultaneously making her hungry and nauseous.

Ben sat down beside her. "I swear it'll be worth your time." He promised. "And you'll love it. I know you will."

He took her hands and busied himself with rubbing her chilly fingers, which made Mal a little less annoyed than she was. It was a sweet, somewhat sappy gesture.

Mal smirked and met his eyes. "Yeah... well, I guess I prefer your surprises when I'm not getting cold on the pier."

"You'll love it," Ben repeated. "In fact, this is the pinnacle achievement of my career. I don't think I'll be able to top this."

"Oh?" Mal asked. "You're pretty confident in yourself then?"

Ben nodded with a smile. "Oh yeah." He nodded. "I might even get a kiss for this."

Mal laughed. "Wow, what a hefty payment." She rolled her eyes. "You get those anyways. If this is really as great as you say, shouldn't you get something special?"

"Can I have two kisses?" Ben asked, raising an eyebrow cheekily. "Or, can I see you try a new spell? That'd be cool too." Mal rolled her eyes and let out a sharp guffaw. As Ben chuckled, the air quality dropped for a few seconds. Mal felt like all the air was pulled out of her lungs as her ears popped and she was pulled forward, off the rusted beam she'd been using as a bench. Ben looked shocked by the pull too.

She looked out over the bay and saw a magnificent golden road breaking out across the waves and stretching towards the bay like a bridge made of out sun rays. It looked as if it had come from the Isle of the Lost. Traveling on the bridge was something small – a speck that slowly took on the shape of a limo from the palace as it grew closer and closer to the land, traveling at magnificently fast speeds. It slowed as it reached the wharf, touching down on solid soil. The golden bridge had faded somewhat and was suddenly translucent. The car turned sharply, and Mal saw that it was the car Stewart usually drove.

It was dented severely. It looked like something large and heavy had been dropped into the hood. Dark streaks of nasty substances covered it, and a thin white mist was emitting from the engine.

Ben exhaled.

The limo faced them and began to approach slowly. Mal took a few steps forward and furrowed her brow as it grew closer and turned to the side. Her fists balled up in preparation for a fight. Even though it was clear Ben had expected the car, it didn't look like he'd expected the damages. She was now staring at the side with the openable door. And even through the heavily tinted windows, she could see frantic movement inside.

No sooner had the car stopped than said door burst open and a blue-haired, fair-skinned beauty leaped out and rushed towards the purple-haired fairy queen. "Mal!" Evie yelled as she threw her arms around her old best friend and lifted her off the ground.
"What – I – Evie?" Mal sputtered. Her arms were pinned tightly to her sides as Evie squeezed her. Over her head, Mal watched as two other figures stepped out of the car. Her jaw dropped. One was Jay, but he'd gotten even bulkier from when she last saw him. Larger, stronger, but he still had those unfading tones of starvation set in his skin. The other was Carlos, whose hair had grown out from the short curls she'd known him with. He still had black roots, but the white had grown out to hang around his ears. Five guards in varying stages of hurt were also behind them.

Even Evie looked different. Her hair was lighter, more electric. And she was wearing less mascara and eyeliner. Instead of shades of black, she was now wearing shades of bright and colorful blue. All three of her friends were extremely dirty and tired-looking.

Jay and Carlos walked over slowly. Jay had a small limp, and Carlos had a quickly appearing bruise on his cheekbone as the two stared hollowly at Mal. Evie set her down and put her hands on Mal's shoulders to examine her.

"Are you hurt at all?" She asked. "There isn't a scratch on you. Have you been okay?"

"I'm fine." Mal gasped. "Carlos… your cheek." She looked behind them, at the guards. One of them was cradling a busted arm and another had a bit of skin missing from his forehead. Their armor had been broken in multiple places, and one woman's leg panel had been cut off, though she herself looked mostly okay.

The front door of the car opened, and Stewart stepped outside. He had a black eye and a split lip. Mal covered her mouth and gasped when she saw him. Stewart smiled at her though. "Not to worry, miss Mal." He said in a kind tone. "Your friends are safe, and our Sophia will fix me up as soon as we get to the palace."

"Yeah, she will." Mal swallowed. "What happened?" She turned to Ben. "You brought my friends off the Isle?"

"Good surprise?" Ben asked with a shaky smile. "I thought it was high-time you had someone to talk to in the palace beside Sophia and me. So I sent people to try and see if they could convince them to come." He outstretched his hand to the three Isle kids. "I'm Ben." He introduced. The three of them exchanged wary glances.

"It's not even our anniversary or anything," Mal said with a small, happy pout. "You did this just for me?"

"Technically, the one-year holiday thingamajig is next month, and you'll be at the Isle. But anyway, you needed this. You need more friends." Ben crossed his arms and exhaled. "Now, what happened? Were you guys attacked?"

"Did you honestly expect our parents to just let us go?" Carlos asked in disbelief. "The villains have shut down everything."

"Did you honestly expect our parents to just let us go?" Carlos asked in disbelief. "The villains have shut down everything."

"Everything?" Mal frowned.

"Ben, Mal," Stewart called their attention, stepping forward. "It seems the villains are grouping together. We managed to find Carlos, Evie, and Jay, but the villains attacked us as we were trying to leave. We ended up fighting for our lives. No one escaped the Isle, but a few Islanders were wounded in the scuffle."

"They tried to kill you?" Mal frowned, straightening up. "Who? I want names or descriptions, now." She crossed her arms, lighting up her eyes and leveling her gaze at each of her friends and

"I punched Gaston in the face." Jay volunteered. "I think King Candy is the person who dropped Cruella's broken piano onto the car to try and stop it."

"There were too many to count." A guard explained. "So many that they got in the way of each other and couldn't fit through the alleyways. They spoke in many languages and couldn't always understand each other, which may have been the only reason we got away."

"The entire Island is in chaos." Jay stopped the conversation. "They're saying that your city is legit."

"It is." Mal frowned. "Everyone is angry because the city is good, and... because I won't let bad people in?"

"Why would they let anyone have a happily ever after if they can't?" Evie asked. She was watching Ben as he rested a hand against his mouth, watching his wife do her job.

Mal exhaled and closed her eyes. "Have they started holding people back, then?" She whispered. "This quickly?"

"Did you expect this?" Ben asked.

"Of course," Mal exhaled. "I always knew the villains would come around to question my authority. Now the problem is just... the numbers and timing. I was hoping the Isle would be up a little longer." She closed her eyes. "How many are inside who still want to come?"

"Lots," Carlos told her. "People are still slipping through and escaping. Maleficent and the villains are trying to corral everyone inside the ruins and down by the dock."

"At least 700, but probably more," Evie told her. "Because lots of people are just staying quiet so she doesn't try to hurt them too."

"How are they being kept?" Mal squinted at her friend as the sunlight suddenly broke through onto the dock and the smell of fish intensified.

"We were locked in a room," Evie admitted. "A basement room. One of the ones with the small windows. There were eight others, and the floor had been ripped up to open to the ground. We had gunk freeze on us from the air."

"Prisoners." Mal frowned. "Why were you being locked away?"

Evie frowned at Ben, standing behind them, and looked away. "Well, your escort, she... insinuated I was afraid to talk to you again." Evie sniffed and crossed her arms, gaze hardening as her tone turned to something akin to grit. "And so I came to see if I could protect you. Maleficent caught me leaving right after she was rejected by your... workers."

"I don't need protection," Mal responded immediately. She exhaled, wiping her hands on her legs. "I'm fine. I'm safe. And now, you are too." She examined each of her friends. "We need to go to the palace now." She decided. "I need to be in my office for this."

There was a long pause where Mal looked each of them up and down, looking at their outfits and the shape of their faces. A smile broke through her tight, worried expression. "I can't believe you're
here." She laughed and stepped forward to wrap Jay and Evie up into a large hug. Jay buried his nose into her hair for a few seconds and examined Ben as he straightened up with a smaller smile behind them. Carlos took a sidestep around Mal and put himself between her and the young king. Mal bumped into him as she relinquished Jay and Evie, and turned to throw her arms around him. Carlos put his arms around Mal and shuffled her closer to Evie and Jay, effectively blocking Ben away from her. Jay kept a steady gaze on Ben, who was starting to realize his wife's three friends weren't exactly keen to meet him.

Mal laughed and disentangled herself from Carlos. She turned around and tried to sidestep Carlos. "Excuse me." She hummed, brushing past him. Carlos caught her arm and furrowed his brow at her in confusion. Mal pulled out of his grasp and went to give Ben a hug and a quick kiss. Evie stood still, holding her hands out like she wanted to snatch Mal back and looking thoroughly shocked at Mal's behavior. "Thank you." Mal smiled and kissed his cheek. "But... you went around my back to pull three of my citizens off my territory." She sighed and stepped back. "You and I have to have a discussion on how Auradon still has access to my barrier."

"Fair." Ben sighed in acquiescence. "I would ask you next time. I just wanted this one to be a surprise."

"Next time we'll do things my way, without your loopholes." Mal decided. "However they were able to summon that bridge and open the barrier, I don't want it to happen again. Ever." She folded her arms.

"It's a remote." Ben nodded. "I'll hand them over to you. I probably should have done that when the Isle separated anyways."

"Yeah, I'm a little upset I'm finding out about this now." Mal pinched her lips together. "How long will it take you to gather up all those remotes?"

"A day," Ben assured her. "I'm sorry I went behind your back with your kingdom."

Mal hummed. "Well, I liked your surprise. It was well worth freezing on the docks for. Just, uh, not again." She looked over at her friends, whose faces had become overshadowed with doubt and confusion. "And are you sanctioning them? Or just bringing them for a visit?"

"They're free to stay in Auradon as long as they want." Ben nodded, wrapping an arm around her waist. "Just like you."

"Free to... stay in Auradon," Carlos repeated slowly.

"Free?" Jay scoffed.

Mal pinched her lips together and closed her eyes. "There are things I need to explain to you guys." She exhaled. "But not here. At least for the ride back, I want to just be happy that you made it. I've missed you so, so much." She sniffled a little.

Ben took her hand and together they walked down to the damaged palace limo. Ben outstretched his hand and shook every single one of the guard's hands. They straightened up as he passed. Stewart took Mal's hand and patted it. "I called a new car down, and a tow service." He informed them. "Head on up, and we'll return within the hour."

"Thank you, Stewart." Mal smiled. "You're always right there when we need you."

Stewart smiled and he and Mal shared a quick hug before they led the three villain kids down to Ben's car, which they had driven down. Ben opened the driver-side door and turned to smile at his
wife. "Do you want to drive, or do you want me?" He asked.

"I can." Mal smiled and stepped inside. Ben leaned down to kiss her again, and then shut her door. Evie, Jay, and Carlos looked on in absolute shock.

"Here," Ben invited, opening the rear driver side door and gesturing to the back row. "We'll take you up to the palace, and Mal will catch you up on everything." He walked around to the passenger seat and got in there as Mal's three friends exchanged worried looks and took hesitant steps towards the car. They climbed inside, watching as Mal put music on that they didn't recognize from a phone that was clearly hers, pulled her seat belt across her shoulder, and slid the car into gear like she'd done it thousands of times before. Ben started humming along to the song as Mal put on a pair of sunglasses to shield from the light outside and then dropped her hand into his.

Jay watched it all, feeling like someone had shot him through the chest.

"Lumiere, can you call Eliza Deavor on the Isle of the Lost and inform her I won't be coming down today at all?" Mal asked as she, Ben, Jay, Evie, and Carlos wandered through the Main Hallway, where the aged attendant was shaking hands with a group of schoolchildren who were going up to Belle's library as part of a palace-endorsed school event. The young children's mouths dropped open and the teachers straightened up as they watched the two young leaders appear. Mal waved a little at the young children before she continued. "I also need to page the docks and tell the supply boat I usually take that I'm not making it so that they don't keep waiting on me. Will you have a moment to do that, or should I ask someone else?"

Lumiere nodded with a smile. "I'll see to it that it gets done, Miss Mal." He agreed. "Where will you be? In your office?"

"Yes." Mal nodded. "I'll probably be meeting with these four for the rest of today and discussing a problem on the Isle of the Lost." She gestured to the four behind her and Lumiere nodded, examining the three dirty young adults with her.

Mal brushed her hair back a little and exhaled. "Thanks, Lumiere!" She bid, and then led her friends into the west wing, where the offices were. Ben followed her up and the three Isle kids grouped increasingly away from the pair and closer together as they watched.

Mal flipped the light on in her office and stopped to watch everyone walk in. Evie, Jay, and Carlos kept their distance from Ben. Ben leaned against the wall by Mal as she stood at the door, watching her friends examine her office. Carlos ran a finger along her computer screen. Mal had no doubt that, given enough time, he'd be better at using it than she was. Jay looked out the windows, down towards the palace grounds, and then tucked his hands into his pockets. Evie looked over at the wall opposite the windows and exhaled. It was covered in sketches of the Isle, of Mal's plans, and of them.

Mal took a few steps into the room and closer to Ben at the same time. He put an arm around her shoulders and watched all of her friends gear up a little, getting ready to protect her. He looked down at her. Mal's face was expressionless.

"You made it back?" A voice came from the doorway. Everyone turned and a smile spread across Ben and Mal's faces.

"Hey, Mom." Ben smiled as Belle and Sophia stepped into the doorway. Sophia and Evie locked eyes, and Evie turned a little green. He held an arm out to hug his mom, but Belle wrapped her arms around Mal first, leaving him to stare at her incredulously. "Rejected." He whispered.
"Sorry, sweetheart. You know I always wanted a girl." Belle hummed, kissing Mal's cheeks as she laughed at Ben. Ben held a hand to his chest as if he was suffering a mortal wound.

"I brought you these," Sophia announced, holding up a ceramic bowl. "There's blueberries mixed in so that you're not eating the same fruit all the time. Congrats." Mal's eyes lit up as she took the bowl from Sophia. It was full of her favorite snack. Jay finally managed to look at her face as she took one and bit down. She set the bowl down on the desk.

"How did it go?" Belle asked, hugging her son as he rolled his eyes.

"Cars busted." Ben sighed. "And we have problems from the Isle of the Lost to deal with now."

"We're happy to be here too." Jay snapped. "About time you actually started dealing with us instead of always sweeping us under the rug."

Ben, Belle, Mal, and Sophia turned and stared at the large, imposing man as he took a pencil off of Mal's desk and twirled it in between his fingertips. Ben swallowed. "Um, I didn't mean that, Jay. I was talking about--"

Jay crushed the pencil in between his two hands, from the lead to the eraser, and tiny pieces like sawdust fell out from between his fingertips. Mal balled her fists up. "Right. There's also this issue to deal with." She exhaled and turned back to the Auradonians. "I need you guys to leave for a while, please. Ben, will you be in your office?"

"Yeah," Ben nodded. "Are you... will you be okay?"

"I will be." Mal nodded. "Just go, now. I'll call you if this conversation gets into Auradon at all. And hey, if you get off before I get out, you should set up a movie. Something I haven't seen yet." She kissed his cheek and Ben sighed and nodded. He and Belle stepped outside and Sophia hovered in the doorframe. She nodded her head to the Villain Kids, whose expressions darkened at the gesture.

"Will they be okay?" She whispered.

"We'll see." Mal sighed. Sophia nodded, stepped back, and Mal shut the door. She turned around and peeled her Isle jacket off. Then she stood, unsure of herself for a few seconds as she twisted the collar. Finally, she exhaled. "I don't know where to begin."

"Let's start with where are you hurt?" Evie suggested, reaching over and taking Mal's arm before guiding her to her own chair. Jay turned and brushed folders and things off of her desk and Carlos moved her computer screen away as the stood in front of the desk.

"No, let's start with correcting this premise that I need rescuing." Mal decided. She tossed her jacket over the back of her chair, brushed Evie's grip off of her, and pushed the chair in. "Because I'm fine."

"Mal, the palace isn't around." Carlos frowned. "And if the office is tapped, we can barricade the door and help you escape."

"The curse is broken," Mal revealed. Evie, Jay, and Carlos's hands fell slack at their sides. Mal pinched her lips together and met each other their eyes in turn. "I'm free to leave. I don't have to stay." She planted her hands on her desk. "I want to stay."

Evie's legs shook and she grabbed onto the desk for support. Mal snapped her fingers at the chairs on the side of the room. "Move these chairs into this space so we can sit down in this place." She
mumbled. Three chairs moved out of place and pulled themselves towards the desk. Slowly, Evie, Jay, and Carlos sat down. Only Carlos looked relatively distracted by the magic. Mal picked up a trashcan and held it out to Jay. Jay dropped the splinters from the pencil into the bin, and Mal set it down without a word. "When I arrived here, they weren't expecting, well, me. They thought I'd be older, that I'd know everything about the plan. They thought I'd destroy Auradon. Instead, I was small, far younger than Ben, completely ignorant to my mother's plans, and I forfeited as much power as I was able to. They recognized that the situation was unfair, and so they set about doing their best to make things as equal as they could be given the circumstances. They gave me my country back and allowed me freedom without my having to fight for it. I can leave. I can not come back. I can invite people into the palace. I have power."

Mal took a seat behind her desk with a sigh. "I... can't bring people into Auradon. Ben is in control of the barrier to Auradon. I recognize now I need to restrict Auradon from going over without my knowledge, but that's a story for another time. I'm not allowed to bring people over, I can command individual servants of the law but never entire battalions or the army. I can't..." Mal trailed off. "Well, there's not a lot I can't do anymore." She hummed and picked up a strawberry from her bowl before nudging it a little closer to her friends so they could steal some if they wanted. None of them moved.

"How long has the curse been broken?" Evie whispered. Her hands were shaking in her lap.

"Not long," Mal responded. "Since the beginning of the month. But even from the beginning, there was the option that I never had to be queen, that I could just live in the palace so long as we were married in secret and I could technically have that power, even if no one knew. I chose to step up." She picked up some files off of her desk with a heavy sigh. "I could technically forfeit my kingdom back to Ben and have him continue everything that I've been working on, but I don't want to. I'm here to stay. I want to fix the Isle, strengthen the moorlands, teach Auradon some manners and stay married to Ben." She folded her fingers together on top of her desk.

"Ben captured you." Jay annunciated slowly, staring at his oldest friend in shock.

"King Adam sent the guards, not Ben. And they were expecting, at the least, a villainess who was older than Ben and who would maul him the second she stepped out of the car." Mal pointed out. "And let's get this straight, right now, because it took me eleven months to work through this." She tapped all five of her finger on the desk twice and exhaled. "I am in love with Ben. For real. This is all for real. It started with him telling me I deserved a happily-ever-after, and it got worse when he taught me to drive and make snowflakes, and then he supported me with the moorlands and all my endeavors on the Isle, even when things didn't work out well for him while I was gone, and now I'm in all the way. This is the end-all statement to my entire being. I have fallen in love with him, and I don't want out."

Jay sat back, face white, and looking a little ill. Carlos's expression had gone slack, and he was leaning forward to watch Mal's face intently. Evie was tearing up, and struggling not to let any tears fall. Mal swallowed as she watched them break. "I know what you've been thinking." She whispered. "I... visited the hideout a while ago. I saw the wall and everything you did to the pictures, and I don't know how to convince you otherwise, but I swear I'm not being hurt. Ben is... everything Auradon claims they are. He's good. He's kind. He supports me even when I hurt him. Even when I push him away, and I yell, and I tell him to get out. He never gives up on me."

"Why didn't you try to talk to us?" Carlos asked. "You could have reached out way before we were locked in a basement room for trying to escape."

"I was afraid my mother would hurt you." Mal squeezed her eyes shut. "I didn't want her..."
stringing you up as bribery. I was worried the Islanders would kill you if you looked like you were
too close to the Royals. And I couldn't bring you over. What was I supposed to do, show up on a
dangerous island full of people who hate any connection to the crown of Auradon, who doubt me
even now, every day? And with my mother there, who was waiting for me to bring her over? Or
was I supposed to send guard over to hunt you down every once in a while so they could relay
pitiful messages about how I was that you wouldn't have believed anyway? How many times do
you think I could have sent guards over to find you before the Islanders would have gotten brave
enough or desperate enough to hurt them and try to get the palace to pull them off in exchange for
their lives? You saw today, there were five guards, plus Stewart. Sure, the Isle is in a panic about
that city, but I doubt the situation would have been too much less drastic if it'd happened, say, after
I took power over the Isle. Or after we started construction? They would have assumed, every time,
that I was going to pull you off just because we were once in a gang together."

"Was it Ben's idea?" Jay snarled.

Mal slammed her hands on the desk. "Stop attacking him." She demanded. "I mean it." She took a
deep breath. "He asked if it would be a problem. I made the decision. Just like I made the decision
to try and sneak in alone to leave you something later on. You can call that manipulation or careful
planning, but that same thing has happened to Auradon's government since I stepped in. You may
not have noticed, but people are actually accepting the fact I use magic in the moorlands and on the
Isle and, sometimes, in the palace." She exhaled and put her head in her hands. Her shoulders gave
a small tremble, and she closed her eyes. In all her imaginations, in all her fantasies, she'd never
imagined her first conversation with her friends going like this.

"What can I say that will convince you guys?" She whispered. "I can sit here and talk about the Isle
and Auradon and the Moors. I can tell you about Christmas and let you in on every detail that has
gone down since I came here. But I can't explain... his honesty to me whenever I need help with
my kingdoms. I can't explain how hard it was for him to put up a brave front to Auradon when he
felt guilty that I had to marry him before I was even old enough to drink in Auradon. Or when
Audrey told him I'd never be enough for him or especially when the curse was broken and we
started laying out plans for me to leave." Mal looked up and reached across the desk for Evie's
hand. Evie placed her palm, shaking, in Mal's. "He didn't beg me to stay. He couldn't look at me.
He just sat there and wept as Belle was talking about whether or not I wanted an annulment,
because he loves me enough to let me go if I want to leave. But I can't explain any of that to you
without you thinking he's manipulating me." Mal squeezed Evie's palm and withdrew a little bit,
leaning into her chair. "What can I say? Really?"

Silence stretched across the desk. None of her friends wanted to say anything else. Mal couldn't
bring herself to meet their eyes. She swallowed, one last time, and closed her sermon. "If I'm lying,
if I'm being tapped by the palace, I can always come back and ask for help later. Nothing has to be
done now. But what happens if I'm not trapped? What are you guys going to do if everything has
been the truth and I'm happy and in love, and I don't need to be rescued? Can you live with that?"

Evie started to cry silently, panicking as her mascara began to run in blue streaks down her cheeks.
Mal found a box of tissues under her desk on an exposed shelf and pushed it forward. Evie took
four or five, dabbing at her eyes and nose and trying her hardest to not completely break down.
Carlos covered his face with his hands. Jay pushed his chair back and began to pace back and forth
behind the desk. Mal pressed her fingertips to her forehead as she watched their movements. After
a minute or so, Evie stood up and hurried to the door, taking at least seven or eight more tissues
with her in white fistfuls. She slipped out and walked off down the hall quickly, but Mal could still
hear her best friend's unabashed sobs from a distance. Jay put his hands down, one on the back of
Evie's chair and the other on the back of his, and stared at her. "So what next?" He spat. "You think
Auradon is actually going to let you, a villain's daughter, have a happily-ever-after?"
"You think Auradon can stop me?" Mal challenged, rising to her feet. "I'm not even an Auradonian citizen; I'm just married to one."

"So, what next?" Jay repeated, his demand growing more insistent and violent.

"What next?" Mal sputtered.

"What next?" Jay affirmed. "You say you're staying, so what? You going to have his children and then stay in the palace, cooped up every day with no sunshine until you're old and-"

"What is it with everyone asking us about children?" Mal exclaimed, exasperatedly. Her voice started to rise dangerously. "No, no, you've got it all wrong. I'm going to finish the Isle, save all those poor people from the villains, help the moorlands design and build their underground city, and Ben and I are going to legalize magic in Auradon!"

"You're not thinking far enough!" Jay proclaimed. "Because there's only a matter of years before you're older and he's older and what are you going to do then? You can't run off to the moorlands and to the Isle every day if you have Prince Useless the second hanging on your legs!"

"Prince Useless?" Mal demanded in a high shriek.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and Mal wretched it out to glare at the screen. A message from Adam to Belle, Ben, and herself read: "What is going on? We can hear screaming in the library." She growled at the notification and slapped her phone onto the desk before stomping over to the door and listening out into the hallway. "Evie?" She yelled. "I'm closing the door again!" She pressed the door into the lock and heard it click shut, then turned around with a deep breath.

Jay slapped Carlos's arm. "Did I say it right?" He demanded. "You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"You said it right." Carlos nodded, keeping his face turned towards the floor. "And Mal... he's kind of right. Ben's going to want you to stick around eventually, especially if his family is on the line. And when you're old and you can't move as well... are you really prepared to stay here forever?"

Mal closed her eyes. She loved Ben, she knew that, but she was still thinking short-term, temporary. One foot in front of the other. One goal first. "I don't know." She bit out. "We've talked about it in the past, but the fact is I'm too young for him to consider a family path with me. As for when I'm old..." She trailed off, trying to imagine herself with wrinkles and grey hair. She wouldn't be able to climb the palace walls or run to the Isle every day. Maybe the Isle and the moorlands wouldn't even need her. She didn't know what she'd do. "I don't know." She admitted. "But I do know I want to stay with him because he makes me happy."

"We make you happy." Jay protested, stepping forward and taking her upper arms. "What can he give you that we can't? Freedom, hope, you've already got a title! Carlos could build you a car, I bet!" Behind Jay, Carlos looked very unsure of that statement.

"It's not about what Ben gives me, it's about who he is!" Mal stressed, brushing his hands off. "You guys can't be Ben for me. It's true, I love you all, but I married him and he's part of my life now."

"But you could get someone who... who doesn't-" Jay, apparently, couldn't think of anything off the top of his head that he knew Mal would hate about her husband. "There's Carlos and I!" He tried.

Mal's cheeks flushed scarlet red, and so did Carlos's. She swallowed. "I, ahem, hope you weren't insinuating what you sounded like you were." She fumbled.
Jay suddenly seemed to realize what he'd said. "Oh, no, of course not." He backed off with his hands falling to the side. "Just... don't you want what we had before? Never caring about what anyone said about us and screaming and making people run away from us?"

Mal sighed. "I mean, yeah, I miss it, but not enough to want to go back. I kind of look back on it as a fond time. But my life is better now."

Jay stared at her like she was a new person. He squinted at her like he was seeing the sun after being stuck in the dark for ages. Mal patted his arm. "I know this is hard on you, but I just can't leave when I finally feel like I'm where I'm meant to be."

There was another long, uncomfortable silence. Mal reached forward and put a hand on Jay's shoulder, but he ripped it away and stomped towards the door. "Where are you going?" Mal demanded.

"Out," Jay said in a gruff tone, wrenching the handle open and pushing the door outwards.

"Don't leave the grounds," Mal commanded. "I'll have the servants set something up for you." She turned, covering her face with her hands. Her phone buzzed again on her desk. It might have not been the first time. She could have sworn she'd heard it vibrating through her argument with Jay. Carlos picked up the phone and skimmed the messages.

"I think it's the Royals," He announced in a dull tone. "'Mal is in meeting with her friends, trying to catch them up on her life', 'They're not the biggest fans of Ben, I see.', 'what's this about legalizing Magic? Ben, that's an important law we made for a reason.', 'Relax. No concrete plans on that. Let her finish. I think she closed the door so the palace can't overhear.'"

Carlos handed her her phone and Mal set it in her pocket with a weary expression. "I'm sorry." She mumbled hollowly.

"Me too," Carlos agreed in a bitter tone. He stood up, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "We'll fill you in on the Isle later. For now, we just need... space."

Mal nodded and watched him leave her office to find the other two. She pinched the bridge of her nose and pulled her phone out. One text to the palace guards: "Do not let the VK's leave the estate." One text to Ben and his parents: "Don't talk to them. They had a lot of misconceptions on what was going on and it will take time and space for reality to sink in." And finally, a phone call to Eliza and Evelyn on the Isle. She drummed her fingers on her desk as the line connected.

"Eliza Deavor?" A girl's voice confirmed.

"Eliza, this is Queen Mal," Mal hummed, sitting up and glaring at the clock on the wall. "I need you to get a message out. The Rotten Isle is unsafe, and people are only to venture out with the utmost caution. I'm going to be returning soon to set things straight with our parents."

There was a long pause, and Eliza swallowed. "Yes, your Highness," She confirmed.

Mal's mouth pinched into a line, but she didn't correct the young girl. Just this once, she'd let it slide.

And finally, one text to Ben.

"I'm going to have to go into the Isle to rescue those who are being held back. I think the villains will be more likely to back down if we have more numbers. In short, I want to take the day we said we'd let Auradonians come into the Isle, and I want to actually show them the Isle. You okay with
"How have I done so far?" Mal asked, looking over all the pages of her story on the computer screen.

"Really well. Is this an intermission?" The person behind the computer screen asked.

"I don't know. Geesh, I'm tired. But what I need to do right now is introduce something that I didn't actually get to see, and set the stage for the next and final part of the story."

"Sounds like this is our intermission, then. It's about halfway at any rate. Please continue."

"Here's what happened. Evie, Jay, and Carlos had a... hard time accepting Mal's new life. They still couldn't trust Ben entirely, and it's something that would follow them for a few years. Still, they did manage to pull themselves together long enough to tell Mal what had happened. And boy, was it intense.

"Maleficent had been confident Mal would do her bidding and had no reason to think otherwise. After the Castle issued their proclamation that Mal would be coronated, everyone on the Isle had all figured that Maleficent had actually done it, and the villains would win after all. The Isle had celebrated up until the day it was explained that the Isle would be severed from Auradon and that Mal would have no power over its inhabitants. Maleficent had laughed and assumed it was Mal integrating herself into Auradonian society before striking. Mal had been married, had spent her honeymoon becoming the queen of the moors, and then set to work on the Isle... all with her deranged mother believing on some level that her daughter would save her. Over time though, she'd grown more and more doubtful, and had retreated into herself. For months, she had waited. Maleficent had deluded herself into believing that everything – the new city, the talks with Auradon, her website blog – everything had been Mal waiting for the moment to pounce. And she believed this right up until she'd arrived at the gates of the new city and been denied entrance.

"At that moment, reality spoke depths into Maleficent's mind. She went home to find Carlos and Evie packing their bags, intending to get out while their parents were in the other room, and exploded. For days, she kept all of her sector on lockdown, hoarding everything and keeping everyone on the surrounding five blocks in the same vicinity. Other villains had traveled from different parts of the Isle to bond together and keep their children from running off and stealing away. There were so many people packed in such a close area that many were starting to get sick, and people were beginning to starve. Due to the highly concentrated numbers, some were able to escape unnoticed. Meanwhile, murderers and thieves scurried among them, taking out people from the rooftops for fun and stealing things to create massive hoards away from everyone else. Mal's city was safe and orderly, but the rest of the Isle was descending into chaos." Mal let out a little breath as she finished explaining, in short terms, the two-hour meeting.

"Is this where I come in?" Her assistant looked up, furrowing their brow a little.

"Not quite. Almost, though. You come in when Auradon starts being more involved in their politics. Before that, something really bad happened up north."

"Oh, now I remember."

"Yeah. Our sea monster returned for a second look. A short scrimmage confirmed to it what no one had known - that our continent existed. Auradon was about to change forever."
It was dark. The air tasted of stagnant salt and musky mist. The waves crashed against the metal hull of the Auradonian Auxiliary Craft and made the overseeing officer brace a hand on the railing as he stared out into the night. 22:47 and his shift ended on the new day. It seemed like forever since King Ben had ordered them northward. They were currently on the far west side of Auradon, patrolling for the creature.

There was a flash of something rough in the water down below and the officer looked back over with a frown. "Off the Starboard Beam!" He called, pulling a flashlight out of his belt and shining it down on the dark waters below.

Another call came from the bow. "Starboard Bow!" they called, and the overhead lights flipped on from above.

After several seconds, a call came from the bridge. "We've picked up something on the radar!" They announced. "It just appeared off the beam side!" As if this announcement had called for some sort of drastic response, the boat rocked immediately towards the right side. The officer was thrown into the railing as the boat swayed, and an alarm sounded on the ship. The two other boats that had been skirting the Auxiliary Craft also began to blare alarms. Spotlights were shot down into the water from the craft that had been following on the right, and a long, hideously greenish brown tentacle was revealed to have hooked around the anchor. Another three tentacles took hold on the railings of the ship and the sea monster they'd been chasing down pulled itself up and out of the water.

Boy, was it ugly. Large and brown with hideous fins behind two eyes that reflected off the spotlights. The officer pulled out his gun, which had been strapped to his back, and fired. The creature let out a bellow of agony. On the other ship, two naval guns were being directed to the monster. The officer shot once more and then dove out of the wave as another tentacle came down on his head. Where he'd been standing, the creature punctured the hull and opened up the dining area, thankfully empty, to the dark and salty outdoors.

"Ready! Aim! Fire!" The loudspeakers on the other ship bellowed. A barrage of gunfire echoed over the officer's head, and the creature bellowed in agony and released the ship. He rolled into the wall as the watercraft righted itself, and could hear the openings for underwater missiles opening as the sea monster began to swim away, with the spotlight following it. The companion ship on the right side was also ordering for missiles. The officer scrambled to his feet and dashed to the bow of the ship, where four other naval soldiers had hurried to watch the creature flee. He barely had time to take hold on the railing and look down when the missile was fired and they watched a flash of silver travel forward, towards the creature. At the last possible second, it dodged, and the missile sailed past it. In the moment it passed, a second was loosed from the right-side ship. This one met its match, as a sudden upwards waterfall appeared. A gigantic cloud of water mist rose out of the sea, and there was the same bellow from the sea creature. The men cheered and bellowed as he pulled his binoculars from where they were slung around his neck. He looked in the direction of the explosion and completely missed the second explosion, from the first missile.

It exploded about a mile away, and in the darkness, an entire wall of purple light lit up the night sky. Dozens of cracks like lightning scattered across a wall that was higher than he could see and expanded further than the eye could tell. His mouth ran dry as sparks flew in the distance and the large, purple wall stabilized and then remained visible, dimly lit.

"What was that?" One of the underseers demanded of his peers, a shocked expression frozen onto his face. "I thought the monster was there?" He pointed to the bubbling water in front of the ship, about fifty yards away.
"It is," The overseeing officer snapped. "Oh, Sh-" He swore. "The King is going to have our heads." And if not the King, then the Queen, considering this concerned her far more than it concerned King Ben.

"What?" The younger soldier asked, with the same wide-eyed, baffled expression. But the overseeing officer couldn't say anything as the other ship shifted the spotlight, and they watched something zoom past under the water's surface. It was black as the water and almost invisible except for the faint white spots covering its scales. The young soldiers yelled as they watched it vanish into the night. The overseer's mouth was still dry as he turned away.

"Is there anyone in the bridge?" He yelled up to the controlling sector of the ship, cupping his hands around his mouth. A few seconds passed, and then an officer in bright blue appeared, waving his hand to signal he'd heard. "Summon the Captain and open a connection to the Palace so we can speak with the King immediately!"

"What's the emergency?" The man shouted back.

The officer heaved a sigh and began to walk up to the bridge, knowing he'd have to explain this story at least fifty more times before the situation passed. The second ship began to approach the spot where the mountain of water had occurred, hoping to recover the body of their monster while the officer turned over in his head what he'd witnessed. "We may," He began in a yell, picking his words carefully, "Have just declared war on the Moorlands."

Queen Elsa of Arendelle trudged up the carpeted steps in her childhood palace. Her cane made clicking noises on the ground. She pushed the door open to her room and slipped inside, pulling her icy train in behind her. She shut the door softly with a heavy sigh. Another long day. Another few arguments with dignitaries. Another fight with Ericka. She was sick and tired of battling everyone. Elsa kicked off her shoes beside the door and slumped against the wood. A cold wind whipped around the room. She glanced around for the source.

The window was open.

Elsa slid the deadbolt into place on her heavy door and traveled to the window. She peeked outside, making sure to keep a straight expression as she did. No one was there except for the cold wind. Most people would have assumed the wind had blown open the window, but Elsa knew better.

Outside, the moon was rising into the sky above Arendelle. The sky was clear except for cloud hovering on the North Mountain. Lights flickered in the village. Some disappeared as people went to bed and others appeared as people got up to continue work in the dark. She tried to imagine what it would be like to not be Queen. To have a normal life and a normal family with a normal husband who would kiss her every day when he came home. And two normal daughters, one of which who would be dating normally and not dumping boyfriends and causing mayhem, hoping Elsa would somehow manage to call their father home to deal with her antics. Elsa pulled at the ends of her braid and trailed her fingers up and down the length of the stone base the window was set upon. After several minutes, she finally let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm not going to wait all night." She told the night air. "If you're just going to stare, you'll have to do it through the window pane, because I'm tired and I want to go to sleep." Here was another thought: Could people see her window, even faintly, from the village? Probably, if she could see theirs.

There was an impish chuckle that broke her out of her thoughts. She looked up and spotted a bare-footed man hovering above her, about twenty feet away and framed in moonlight. He wore a dark
blue hoodie and brown pants. Clutched in his hands was a curved wooden stick, almost like a shepherd's crook.

Elsa's face didn't change as he floated down to be almost nose-to-nose with her. "You're so pretty to look at, though." He smiled. His breath smelt like frost. "And the night air is so refreshing."

Elsa rolled her eyes. "I see." She said. She turned and left the window to sit on her bed. The young man floated through her window and landed on his feet. Jackson Overland Frost, forever frozen age twenty. Nineteen, really, but twenty seemed close enough. It seemed far from her age now, but it hadn't so much when she'd been younger. A true winter spirit with powers not too different from her own. He came from a far land up north that, unfortunately, was not nearly as 'happily-ever-after' as Auradon was.

Elsa traced her hand over her lacy bedspread, leaving small patterns of frost behind as she thought. "You're usually more talkative." She told Jack.

Jack smiled. "You always render me speechless." He replied smoothly.

"Is something bothering you, Jack?" Elsa asked, turning her icy blue stare onto him.

Jack Frost settled down on the floor by her window. "You were gone for a little while." He began in a soft tone. "When I last came by, Abigail said you had left for Beast's Castle. I've just been worried about you. Is everything alright?"

"There's no one else, Jack," Elsa whispered. "I won't forget you."

She watched Jack fall silent and curl his toes into the floor. Elsa got down onto the floor beside him, carefully pushing her train and dress skirt aside. Jack's eyes lingered on her leg, but it was nothing he hadn't seen before.

"Sorry." He croaked after a minute. "I really do trust you, but… old habits die hard."

Elsa nodded. "I understand." And she did, on a much smaller scale. She'd isolated herself, but Jack hadn't had the luxury of choice. She couldn't imagine what three-hundred years of forced isolation would do to a person, but she could definitely appreciate the principle of loneliness.

Jack twisted his fingers, "I wish I could be around more." He sighed. "It's hard, having to leave so often. How are the girls?"

Elsa sighed and leaned against the wall beside him. "Ericka is still struggling. She can't control her powers and nothing I know helps her. Jessie gets along just fine, but Ericka just wants to fly, and be free, and use her powers as much as possible. She has a special affinity for snow." Elsa paused, tapping her fingers alongside her knee. "The Queen asked if she'd ever tried using a wand or staff." She sighed. "I wonder if… her powers are just more suited to you than me."

"I hope not." Jack sighed. "I'm a spirit of nature. If she's like me, she might not age. She might… freeze in time."

"Still." Elsa probed. "It's worth a shot. If you could just tell me where you got your staff, or even tell me where to find it-"

"The lake where I was reborn has been destroyed." Jack interrupted shortly. He gripped his staff with a rock-hard grip. "Even I can't go back now, with the villains overrunning everything."

"Oh." Elsa sighed. "Things have gotten worse, then?"
"Much," Jack admitted. "The swampland has been taken over. Trolls and Bergens have been forced to move out of their homes and three monsters have escaped from the sea of monsters while I've been busy with Pitch Black. Tai Lung has been flattening villages all by himself. Most of our people want me to try to fuse a barrier around the sea so I can help inland, but I don't know if I have the strength to do it."

Elsa took his hand, which was the same cool temperature as hers. "Maybe if I helped you with it?" She asked. "We could do it."

Jack was silent for several seconds. Then he sighed and rolled up the cuff on his sleeves, which caused Elsa to remove her hands to herself. "Who did you say the queen was?" He asked. "Belle?"

"No." Elsa shook her head. "You've been away for so long, things have changed. Belle's son is on the throne now. He married at the start of his reign, so we have a new queen here too. Her name is Mal."

"Is she pretty good at her job?" Jack asked, twiddling his thumbs around his staff. Elsa knew why he was asking. He didn't exactly agree with or like King Adam, so he'd rather speak to Queen Belle. But given a choice between the new king, who was related to Adam, and the new girl, he'd take the new girl.

Elsa smiled brightly. "I like her a lot. We're friends. She's kind of an interesting situation. They brought her from the land of the villains. We didn't know we were going to have a queen until two months before their marriage. She's technically not the real queen, but I would throw my support behind her any day. She's smart as a whip, a wise-crack, clever and brave. Also…" Elsa nudged Jack. "She's magical."

"No way." Jack breathed, turning to stare at her. "Auradon let a magical person on the throne?"

"I think they like her too, for the most part," Elsa said. "And she's got really expansive magic. Not like ours, where we control snow and ice. She works on the fundamentals of magic. She could probably do anything she wanted with the right spell, but her power growth was stunted by the barrier."

Jack nodded. "Makes sense." He mumbled. He looked at Elsa. "Well, I'm technically not here for you. The guardians have asked I contact Auradon in relation to our missing swine."

"Wow." Elsa raised her eyebrows and exhaled. The Council of Guardians, of which Jack was a part, was the only group of people besides her that actively knew there were two different lands. The fact they were breaking the silence and exposing Auradon to themselves was huge. "This'll be the first contact between our two lands since…" She trailed off.

Jack took her hands. "Us." He finished for her, dark eyes boring into her soul.

Elsa smiled. "Us." She agreed. The words were like a promise between them. Neither you nor I. Neither alone nor together. United, joined, one. Us.

Jack let out a long-suffering breath. "I'm glad the queen is magical. Even if the king has the power, maybe that'll help the king to be friendlier to our cause."

"Ben." Elsa nodded. "He's a good young man. He'll help you."

Jack took Elsa's hand again. "I know I have my own little mission, but is it okay if I hang around for a bit while you get back into the groove of things?"
Elsa smiled. "Of course." She nodded and leaned against his shoulder as more frigid air blew in through the window. "Ericka will be thrilled." She hummed. Her partner laughed beside her. When Jack let out a breath, snowflakes materialized in front of him, and Elsa could do nothing but smile contentedly as a storm materialized outside of Arendelle.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Disney's Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, 101 Dalmations, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Aladdin, Cinderella, Tarzan, Wreck-It Ralph, Incredibles 2, Frozen, or Dreamwork's Rise of the Guardians, Trolls, or Kung Fu Panda.

Reminder: Chapter 23 will be out Monday instead of Wednesday.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Ben receives a fatal call from the Auradon Navy and Mal departs early for the Moorlands. The VK's get the opportunity to visit Auradon Accelerated with Ben before calling Mal in the Moors. A mysterious visitor appears in Ben and Mal's bedroom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There wasn't really a reason for him to be awake. He just was.

The moonlight was streaming in through the window and so he could see the entire room lit up and he could even see a few lights outside as he glanced over. The sheets felt a little bit too warm.

Mal was fast asleep beside him, facing the window like she liked to be, and with her hand curled up beside her cheek. The moonlight bounced off her skin like it was some sort of a faint mirror and he could see her reflected light on the ceiling. It wasn't as bright as it had been back when she had first returned from the moors, but still noticeable. Ben rolled over onto his side to examine his wife's skin. Maybe it was cliche to say it was flawless, or clear, but given that it literally reflected small amounts of light, he felt justified. Her peaceful expression almost looked like it'd been carved instead of that just being her resting face.

He reached over and pulled her hair back from where it had fallen around her face. Ben combed his fingertips through her hair, making sure to skim around her ears, and a little smile spread on his mouth as he examined her features. 'Beautiful, beautiful girl,' he thought, then leaned down to kiss her cheek as she slept on.

A knock came from the other door in the living room. Ben exhaled, letting his eyes rest on Mal several seconds longer before he swung his legs off the bed and unlatched the door into the living room. Another knock sounded as he approached before he unlocked the door and opened it to see a castle servant on the nighttime shift outside. "Yes?" He asked, and stifled a small yawn.

"King Ben," The servant hummed. "Sorry to wake you, but we have an urgent call from the Imperial Navy in the far north waiting for you to receive in your office. A normal call. No film required."

Ben nodded in understanding and glanced back towards the bedroom. "Did they give a reason for calling?" He asked, wondering if he should wake the purple-haired queen for a phone call.

"None." The servant shook their head. "Only that it was absolutely essential they deliver the information to you immediately."

Ben nodded again and held up one finger. He returned to their bedroom and grabbed some slippers and a bathrobe to wear over his pajamas before he shut the door and began to follow the servant down the hall. They hadn't traveled far when they turned a corner and discovered Evie, Jay, and Carlos, sneaking through the hallway and quietly opening doors to peer inside. "Guys?" Ben asked,
The three jumped and whirled around in battle-ready, defensive positions. Ben held his hands up lazily and raised an eyebrow at them. "What are you doing out?" Why aren't you asleep?"

"What's it to you?" Jay snapped. His face had twisted into a menacing scowl upon seeing Ben. "Where's Mal?" He asked.

"Asleep, like you guys should be." Ben yawned. He watched Carlos quietly close the door they'd been looking through and a thought occurred to him. "You're looking for Mal, aren't you?" He guessed.

Evie put a hand on Jay's shoulder as he geared up, ready to fight Ben. None of them said anything, so Ben rolled his eyes and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Our room is usually kept locked." He warned. "And I don't especially mind too much, but she might get annoyed if you keep trying to invade her - our - space."

Evie, Jay, and Carlos exchanged looks, and Evie hiked her chin up a little higher. She was interesting, Ben thought. The only one of the three with any real tact, any manners, and any sense of what royal life should be. "Well, what are you doing up?" She demanded. "If you're looking for us, I assure you we don't need to be looked after."

"Don't worry, I learned that lesson with Mal," Ben replied. "Actually, I'm up on business. I have to take a phone call. Listen, if you want, you can follow me up to my office or just wait here, and I'll let you into our room and you can see Mal for yourself before I go back to bed. That way you don't have to check every single room in the east wing."

The three villain kids exchanged glances, and he could see them debating his legitimacy. Then, slowly, Jay nodded. Ben and the servant continued their walk through the palace, and the three VK's followed behind him.

Ben's office was cold and the moon wasn't shining through the window nearly as vibrantly as it did in their bedroom, though that might have been due to the absence of his lightcatcher. He flipped the light on and went to turn on his computer. the servant watched him and the three kids enter the room and then left. Ben punched in his passcode and saw the app for the secure communication network pulsing at the bottom of the screen. He reached into the desk for a pair of headphones and connected them to the computer before he selected the application and opened the communication line that was open from Auradon's Imperial Navy.

"Good evening, can anyone hear me?" Ben asked, pulling a pad of paper and a pen out in case he needed to take any notes.

"I can." A gruff voice on the other line confirmed. "This is his Majesty, King Benjamin of Auradon?"

"It is," Ben affirmed. "You can call me Ben. Who am I speaking with?"

"You are currently speaking with General Iosua. However, I'm just the overseer for the officer who will be speaking with you tonight." The man explained. Ben heard the rustling of several papers and assumed he was on speakerphone.

"Excellent. Now, they didn't give me a purpose for this call. Mind filling me in?" Ben requested. He clicked his pen twice and then yawned.

"I am going to have Officer Huang fill you in, actually. Thank you for accepting this urgent call at
such a late hour. Here is the officer in question." General Iosua explained. There was a sliding sound, and then a man with a crisp English accent began to speak.

"This is Officer Huang of Auradon's Imperial Navy. Your Majesty, we found your sea monster tonight."

Ben's eyebrows shot up. "Splendid." He yawned. "Do you have it, or-"  

"We hit it up with gunfire and one short-range missile, but no body was recovered. I have information for you instead. The creature might have changed form, or might have dissolved entirely." Office Huang explained.

Ben furrowed his brow. "What makes you think that?" He asked.

"Well, um, it didn't show up on the radar immediately." Officer Huang began. "It appeared, tried to drag the boat down, and we could only see it on the radar after it was there. We think because it's not showing up now that it might have returned back to its form. We did see, briefly, something else in the water that passed through towards the Northeast, and that wasn't visible on our radar either, but we're not sure if it might have been, ahem, something else."

"Like?" Ben prompted.

The officer sighed dramatically. "Well, you see, we actually fired two missiles. One hit the creature, after which we couldn't find it, and the other bypassed it." Ben's hand stilled on the pad of paper. He made an affirming sound, and the officer let out a breath. "We hit the barrier to the Moorlands. The barrier is still lit up as of right now, and we have lots of angry water sprites who are gathering in the water and who are threatening war. We don't know if the other creature we saw might have been something from the moorlands that escaped when we hit it or not."

"You have got to be kidding me." Ben covered his face with his hands. "For real? How far are you from the border?"

"Only a little less than two miles, your majesty," The officer explained. "When we hit it, it flashed up all purple and looked like it was lightning. At first, it was invisible."

"And you have angry sprites there, right now?" Ben asked. He closed his eyes, pressing his fingertips into his brow.

"We do," the officer affirmed.

"I'm going to close the borders." Ben sighed. "Unfortunately, this is out of my hands. I have to go and get my wife to work this out. Oh, goodness." He groaned. "Okay. Any other information you have on the monster or on the state of the barrier, please just type it up in an email and I'll receive it from my cell phone. I have to go and get my wife up now, though."

"Yes, your majesty." Officer Huang agreed. "We're sorry for the inconvenience. Have a nice night."

"You too." Ben groaned and closed the connection. He shut his computer off quickly and grumbled as he got to his feet. "I have to get Mal," He informed her friends, sighing a little as they stared at him. "I really, really hope she can fix this."

He held the door open for them and turned out the light before they hurried through the trek back to the east wing. Ben led them through the corridors, past their rooms, and showed them the path to his and Mal's room. He unlocked the door and let them filter in. The adjoining door to their
bedroom was still open, and he heard Jay take a little breath of relief when he glimpsed Mal's purple hair splayed out on the pillow on the left side. The three followed him in and hovered as he went to her side and put his hand on her shoulder, shaking a little bit. "Mal..." He called.

Mal wrinkled up her nose. Ben heard Carlos whisper to Evie and Jay as he pointed to the reflected light off the ceiling. Ben ran his hand through her hair beside her ear and called again: "Mal." This time, she curled her hand up and opened her eyes. Mal squinted at him, yawned, and then sat up.

"Ben?" She mumbled, rubbing her eyes a little.

"Sorry, I know it's late," Ben whispered, keeping his hand in her hair as she blinked the sleep away. "I just got a call from the navy up north."

"Did you get your monster?" Mal yawned, stretching her arms outward a little.

"No, it doesn't sound like it." Ben sighed. "But they hit the barrier to the Moors trying to get it. Short range missile collided with the barrier. Lots of angry sprites are up there, and they're telling me the barrier is still lit up purple."

Mal frowned at him. "You hit my barrier?" She demanded.

"I'm sorry!" Ben held up his hands in defense. "They just called to tell me. Apparently, your sprites are threatening war."

Mal swung her legs off the bed and stood for a second before she turned and walked straight into Evie, Jay, and Carlos, who she hadn't even heard. She frowned at them all. "What are you doing in here?" She yawned. "I need to get through."

"We just wanted to see you," Carlos explained, jumping out of the way so Mal could walk back into the living room and into the bathroom. Ben followed her and watched as she clogged the sink and began to fill it with water, all before answering Carlos.

"Why? You know I'm fine." Mal frowned. What, did you think I was only being chained up at night?"

Ben looked away pointedly as all three of Mal's friends shifted their weight. "No..." Evie trailed off, looking uncomfortable. "We were just wondering where you were and Ben saw us looking and-"

"You were looking for me?" Mal interrupted. "Did you need anything? Are your rooms okay?"

"We just wanted to... see you." Evie dropped off.

Mal sighed and pinched her nose. "Listen, guys, nighttime is rest time. I have work tomorrow. Or, at least I hope I do, now. You don't need to know where I am every second of the day. I already told you - Ben is not going to hurt me." She shut off the water and then reached for the light, which she'd forgotten to turn on. "That door to the hall is locked every night and so help me, if you pick it, I will spell it so you can't find the entrance. If you need something, there are servants everywhere. If you need me, that's fine, but you can't break in every half hour to make sure Ben hasn't twisted my head off. He's restrained himself this long, I don't know why you think your presence changes anything." She sighed, and then snapped at the water in a language Ben didn't understand. Similar to whenever he used her magical basin, the surface stilled and began to reflect a scene in the moors. Immediately, loud shouts filled the bathroom in dozens of different languages. Mal leaned over the water and hissed out something that sounded like wind through the trees before she spoke a series of chirps and growls. Carlos's mouth dropped open.
Ben couldn't understand anything Mal said as she relayed information back and forth in at least six consecutive languages, so he backed away into the living room, even further from Mal's friends. They eventually looked away from Mal as her cheeks began to burn increasingly red with anger and her eyes lit up. None of them protested when she abruptly slapped the door shut and began speaking in increasingly irate tones to her magical citizens. Ben listened to her under the door and shook his head. "I wish I hadn't have had to wake her up." He mumbled.

None of the three VK's said anything to him. Ben sat down on his and Mal's favorite couch and leaned his head back. "I'm sorry she snapped at you guys. She gets her moods, sometimes, and she's just worried about the moors."

A loud screech, like an owl, echoed under the door and Evie jumped. Ben shook his head. "Not Mal." He mumbled. Almost immediately, a stream of gurgles, whispers, and very strange patterns of sounds echoed up the door. Ben nodded. "That's her speaking Faesh." He spoke aloud. "I hear her use it all the time when she's talking to the moor people that are on the Isle right now."

"What's she saying?" Carlos asked, the first of the VK's to speak to him since they'd seen Mal. Ben shrugged. "Can't understand it. I don't know how she keeps all of her languages straight." He yawned and closed his eyes, and then the bathroom door slapped open again. He turned and watched Mal storm out, eyes blazing, towards their room. The sound of the ongoing problems in the moors echoed out. Mal vanished inside their door and reappeared, sneering at her cell phone. She skimmed the screen and erupted into a series of gnomish words that he was pretty sure were curse words. She slipped from gnomish, back to Faesh, to troll and then to the plunking sound of the water sprite language before she covered her face with her hands and nodded at the image in the sink. It vanished. Mal flipped the light out in the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

"Ka-ver-schn-" Mal began to snap at him in Faesh before she cleared her throat and corrected herself. Ben tensed up as the light dimmed in her eyes a little bit. "Sorry. It's bad. The entire Moorlands already knows all about it. I have creatures making weapons and volunteering for conscription. Have you shut Auradon's borders?"

"Not yet," Ben shook his head, heart sinking. "I will in a moment. Can you fix it or what do we have to do?"

"Well, right now I need them to not attack back." Mal sighed. "And apparently there's already been a squad that set off to try and reach Auroria, though I managed to get them to stop." She leaned over the back of the couch, rubbing her eyes as the green light continued to fade. "I have to go and heal the borders and fix everything." She sighed. "I'll have to leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Ben asked. "But you leave for the moors in a week and a half anyway!"

"If I don't go, you'll have to fight a war against a newly revived nation of magic wielders," Mal replied flatly. "And I might be able to call it off, but not before people die." She leaned down and kissed him quickly, even though her friend's faces twisted a little in rage. "I'll have to hold the Isle down from a distance, and just pray a lot." She sighed.

"I'll pitch in if needed." Ben frowned. "I'm not as popular as you but if I say I'm delivering messages from you, I think I can pull it off."

"If there's a message from the Isle, it'd be nice of you to pass it on, but you don't have authority on the Isle. You only have a partnership with the Queen. I'm already dealing with people thinking you're going to reannex the Isle and force everyone to be good, so let's keep you away from the spotlight." Mal decided. "And besides, I'm supposed to stay separate from Auradon Authority; I
think it's only fair you stay separate from the Isle and the Moorlands. That's just the way it should be."

Ben sighed and nodded. "When are you leaving?" He asked. "When will you be back?"

"I have to leave as soon as possible," Mal groaned. "I should be leaving now, really, but I'm exhausted, so I just ordered the moors to wait for me. I'll probably leave after breakfast, so I can call Evelyn and Eliza." She sat down on the back of the couch and then pressed her hands to her forehead. "And I'll be back in August."

"August?" Evie gasped, slumping her shoulders forward. Ben felt like protesting too, but it was his country that had made the mistake, so he didn't quite feel justified. Mal nodded and raked her fingers through her hair. By force of habit, she found a thin strand and went to chew on it, but Ben reached up and brushed her purple lovks aside. Mal sighed.

"I usually leave for a month anyway. The moorlands need me. I have to help them out."

Ben watched Mal's friends travel to the front of the couch to see them. Jay swallowed. "Could we go with you, at all?"

"No. I won't have time to help you." Mal declined. "The moors are angry. I wouldn't risk Ben going over, who they usually like, much less three strangers who they've never met." She leaned her head on Ben's shoulder and yawned. He found her hand and threaded his fingers through hers.

"You'll do great," Ben whispered. "You always do."

Mal hummed and nodded as her friends took seats on the surrounding armchairs and on the coffee table. "And the curse is broken now, so you should be okay to keep working while I'm gone."

"And your skin won't rot now." Ben nodded, holding their hands up and tracing her fingertips with his free hand.

"Rot?" Evie asked, wrinkling her nose.

Mal nodded, untangling her fingers and then gesturing up to her wrists. "Under the curse, if I left Ben for too long, black rot would spread up my limbs. My feet would usually get it to my knees. It'd be on my ears, up my hands, yeah." She shook her head and laid her head back on Ben's shoulder. "But I would come back and all would be well."

Ben reached around her and put an arm around her shoulders. "We have to go back to bed soon. Especially if you're going to be driving tomorrow."

Mal sighed. "I'm okay to stay up and talk for a little bit." She decided. "I like talking to you guys." Her eyes drifted closed and she curled into his chest a little more.


"Remember staying up late and blowing up your dad's office?" Mal mumbled. Her head sank lower, and finally Ben let her slump across the couch with her head across his legs. He started combing his fingers through her hair as she curled her fingertips into his bathrobe and fell asleep.

"Blowing up your dad's office?" Carlos asked softly, letting his eyes flicker between Ben and Mal.
Ben nodded and yawned. "Failed spell. We tried to see if we could magic the entire room clean, and we blew out all the lightbulbs and threw twenty-years worth of dust into the air." He started combing her hair off of her neck, straightening her locks as she slept on.

"We?" Jay snorted.

"She." Ben corrected. "But I was there, and I had to help her clean it up. So a broad we."

Jay got down on the ground in front of Ben and reached out to touch Mal's hair. Ben hesitated before pulling his hand back as Jay threaded his hands into Mal's hair. Almost immediately, his fingers tangled the locks around her ear and Jay pulled his hands back, leaving knots. Ben started to comb her hair back out carefully, and Jay resorted to putting a hand on her shoulder.

"You trained her well." He grumbled in a soft tone. "On the Isle, she didn't let anyone touch her when she slept, and she was never the first person asleep."

Ben furrowed his brow at the insinuation he'd trained Mal, but let out a little breath and decided to ignore the jibe. "It was the time we spent in the moorlands." He nodded. "She'd just work so hard she'd knock out, and after a while just got to trust me not to touch her or hurt her."

"And you don't, right?" Jay grumbled, squinting at Ben.

"No," Ben shook his head. "I've never hurt her. Made her mad at me, but never hurt her."

"You've made her mad?" Carlos frowned.

"Told her I didn't want to have her do things for Auradon once Chad Charming grabbed her. I got sick of people not respecting her." Ben explained. "Among other things. She used to always harp on me about the Isle. Rightfully so."

Ben ran a thumb down her cheek and smiled as the moonlight hit her skin and bounced the light back onto the ceiling and floor. Jay exhaled. "She didn't used to do that."

"Moorlands." Ben nodded. "It'll be brighter when she comes back." He hummed and brushed a hand down her arm. "Anything else you guys want to ask before I put her back into bed?" He went back to combing her hair out, watching her curl her fingers into his bathrobe.

Evie stood up, looking over the scene. She watched Ben brush Mal's hair back without showing any emotion at all. Then she crossed her arms. "You keep her safe?" She asked, squinting at Ben.

"I do," Ben agreed. He rested his hand on Mal's jaw and watched Evie struggle for words.

"And you keep her happy?" She asked, looking like she'd swallowed a plum.

"God, I hope so." Ben sighed. "She deserves that, at the very least." He drew his thumb down her cheekbone and sighed. "She's not just a pawn or an accomplice. She's my partner. She's the only person in my life who's got my back and who I'm allowed to share all my problems with, for security reasons. She's my other half, and I'm excited for whatever part of her future she wants to share with me."

"Children?" Carlos asked, and Jay flinched back and took his hands off of Mal's shoulder like he'd finally remembered that she was Ben's wife and not just his old friend.

Ben wrinkled his nose a little. "That's certainly the million-dollar question." He sighed. "Everyone's anxious to know when we'll be announcing the future heir." He carefully put his arms
underneath her knees and her head and stood up. He carefully stepped around Jay, holding Mal fast to his chest as he walked back into their room and set her down on her side of the bed. "The fact is that she's a teenager. She's young. I want to hold off on children with her and give her all the space and freedom she wants. And for the record, we haven't even sealed our marriage, so having children isn't on our horizon anytime soon."

"You haven't - oh," Evie's shoulders slumped in relief as Ben arranged Mal's hand on her pillow beside her cheek and then pulled the covers back up over her body. She leaned against the wall and exhaled as Ben leaned down to kiss Mal's forehead. He glanced over at them, and then pulled Mal's hair up off her neck.

"I'm not sure whether or not to be offended by that statement or not." He snorted. "I wasn't about to assault a girl who couldn't drink, vote, or drive in Auradon. And we didn't know each other well enough. It would have hurt us both."

"And now?" Jay asked, furrowing his brow.

Ben shrugged. "We haven't talked about it since April, but I assume we're both still on the same page. She knows that Auradon is an inherited kingdom and my children will get my throne. And the moorlands are the same way. The Isle is still too young to tell. That's just the way things are right now." He started to walk towards the door and gestured that it was time for Mal's friends to leave. "All I can really say is that whenever we're ready, that's a decision we'll make together. And I'm going to protect her through it and help her out. That's just how things are going to work."

Ben unlocked the door to the hallway and waited as Jay, Evie, and Carlos took their last looks at Mal, reflecting moonlight onto the ceiling as she slept. Then they all went out quietly into the hall. Ben could still feel the intense hate wafting off of them, but luckily, it didn't seem as bad as when they'd first been introduced. Maybe they could work things out after all.

Ben was a hundred-percent sure Mal's friends hated him. They wouldn't look him in the eyes, they muttered fiercely whenever they thought he couldn't hear, and generally avoided him. The day that Mal left for the moors, they'd gathered to wish her goodbye, and then vanished. In the week they'd been there, they didn't speak more than two sentences to him on a daily basis and refused to be in the same room with him. Ben couldn't deny he was frustrated. After all, he was Mal's husband, not an old foe!

On the first day of July, when Mal should have returned to the moors, Ben was walking to his office when Carlos, who was nineteen and only a little shorter than Ben, opened a door to a spare room in the hall he was walking through and stopped short upon seeing Ben. His arms were full of computer parts. Ben stopped in the middle of the hallway and munched on an apple thoughtfully as Carlos fidgeted. Then Ben waved and said: "Hey."

"Hey." Carlos moved his head up as he returned the greeting. He began to try to fidget away, but before he could take off, Ben began to talk.

"You like computers?" He asked.

Carlos fidgeted. "Is it a problem? I asked Lumiere and he said there were a couple of older models of some stuff that was stored in here and…" Carlos swallowed.

"Not at all." Ben shook his head. "You know, Auradon Accelerated has a really reputable course on computers and electronics. Our IT guy Doug took it. You should look into signing up."
Carlos hesitated. Ben saw curiosity in his eyes. But he recognized Carlos taking small steps away. Now that he knew he wouldn't be punished for damaging palace property, he wanted out of Ben's presence. "I'll send you more information." He promised. "You can also ask Doug. We'd be happy to send you to school if that's what you want."

Carlos didn't answer. He whirled around the corner and took off in the other direction. Ben watched him disappear, and then pulled out his phone. He opened a text line with Doug and wrote: "One of Mal's friends seems to be interested in tech, but I think he hates me for kidnapping Mal from the Isle. Can you help me out by making friends with him and answering any questions he has?"

Doug didn't answer right away. Ben assumed he must be somewhere else.

Talking to Carlos gave Ben the slightest sliver of hope. He took a deep breath and opened a private message to Hiro Hamada, his not-so-secret idol.

Getting the three angsty young adults in the car had been much easier than he'd originally anticipated. They all sat on opposite sides of the limo and refused to speak to him, but now that they were there, and the car was moving, there was nowhere to run. Ben considered that a success in and of itself.

If it had been Mal in the car, she would have asked over and over when they were going to be there, but he highly doubted Evie, Jay, or Carlos would say anything the entire way there, so he kept quiet as best he could to help them feel comfortable and only updated them with the time every once in a while. None of them knew where they were going, but he felt it was his duty to at least inform them how much longer they'd be in the car.

He was hoping to give them a small purpose in Auradon, even if he was only kidding himself.

San Fransokyo was only forty minutes north of Auradon City, at the tip of Belle's Harbor. It housed Auradon Accelerated, the college of choice for most Auradon Preparatory School students. Auradon Accelerated had one of the largest live-in college campuses in Auradon and specialized in thirty primary courses with tons of different courses branching off of those primary topics. Ben had no idea if anything would even catch the Villain Kids' eyes, but he had his fingers crossed they'd all find something – anything – to help them adapt to Auradon. He was also hoping Jay wouldn't steal anything really bad.

The car began to slow down. Evie, Jay, and Carlos had all been watching out the window and determinedly not looking at him, but now they were coming up on a large driveway with a statue of Tadashi Hamada, the elder of the Hamada brothers, now deceased, which marked the entrance to the campus.

The car stopped. Stewart, Mal's ever-faithful consort, came around to open the door. Jay slid over to the door to guard the others against anything that might attack them as they stepped out. Stewart opened the door, and Jay took a few cautious steps out. Evie followed. As she stood daintily, Stewart held out a hand to help her up. Carlos carefully climbed out behind him, and finally Ben was able to get out and stand behind them as they stared at the Tadashi Hamada statue.

"You want me to wait here, Ben?" Stewart asked. Ever since he'd been asked to walk around Mal down the aisle, Stewart had been on first-name basis with each of the royal family.

"No, thank you, Stewart." Ben smiled. "Please stay in the area, but feel free to busy yourself. There are lots of cool stores and landmarks around. We'll call if we need you."
Stewart nodded and climbed back into the car. He began to drive away. Ben walked toward the statue. It was of Tadashi Hamada on bent knee in cast bronze, holding out a hand with a smile as if he was looking to shake a child's hand. Ben reached up and took his hand, then turned to the VKs behind him.

"It's supposed to be good luck to shake Tadashi's hand." He explained. "Do you know Robert Callahan?"

Slowly, all three nodded. Ben continued. "He was presumed dead in the same fire that killed Tadashi. Tadashi ran back in to save him. Tadashi is the same person who created the Baymax Robotic Nurse, which is a major invention in our hospitals. He wanted to help a lot of people, so when his brother Hiro Hamada remolded the San Fransokyo Institute of Science to help more people, they thought it was only fitting to put him on the east side, where we are, outstretches a hand to everyone who comes inside."

Ben smiled as the three observed the statue. "A copy of my dad's statue at Auradon Prep, which morphs from beast to man, is on the west side. Hector Rivera is on the south side, and Anakin Skywalker is on the north side."

"So, where are we, again?" Evie asked softly.

"Auradon Accelerated," Ben answered. "I wanted to give you guys the opportunity to look around without feeling trapped inside the castle. I thought this was a great place to do it. The Dean of the college, Hiro Hamada, will meet you – us – inside to explain a few things and give you all maps. Since it's July, it's admissions season. There are lots of fun activities going on. I think you'll like it a lot."

They all nodded silently. Ben had come to accept the hostility. They hated him for stealing Mal, that much he could understand. He didn't expect them to forgive him so easily.

Ben led them onto the campus. He noted with pride that both Evie and Carlos let out a deep breath. At least four hundred people were on the grounds up ahead. The path they were on was made of white stone with flowers planted alongside the length, all the way up to a large fountain in front of the main offices. Acres of green grass stretched towards large buildings in the distance that were either modern-looking with glass and angular features or traditional with sloping windows and beautiful brick overlays. The campus was large enough that he didn't know where the dorms were or where any of the activities were, but along the path people were chatting, walking around to find things with their maps, throwing frisbees and other small toys. Small drones floated in the air, and some students who were summer-enrolled sat under the trees, reading and doing homework. Ben was pleased to see a cosmetology student with a wig set out. Maybe that would catch Evie's eye?

A tall man with broad shoulders and a pencil tucked into his messy black hair turned to glance over his shoulder and smiled when he saw them. "Hey." He waved.

Ben tensed up. This was, of course, Hiro Hamada. The guy who had created the super suits for the BH6 team at age fourteen before going on to revamp most of the technology in their country, even catching Ben's parents up to the century in the decade before he was born. It was this man who was the reason half of Auradon wasn't stuck in the stone ages any longer.

"Mr. Hamada." He greeted and shook Hiro's hand. "Pleased to meet you." He said honestly.

"It's nice to meet you as well. Now, may I have all of your names?" He directed his attention to Evie, Jay, and Carlos, who were taking in the sights around them.
Evie looked towards Hiro. She took in everything about him, from his messy hair and clean hoodie to the silver wedding band on his finger. "Evie." She drawled out, holding out a hand. "Daughter of the Evil Queen." Hiro shook her hand without a glance from her face, though several boys and a couple of girls were stopping around them to briefly sum up Evie.

Evie introduced Jay, who was standing slightly behind her with his chest pushed out and a scowl frozen onto his face. Then Carlos held out a hesitant hand and gave Hiro a small smile. "I'm Carlos." He introduced himself, carefully leaving out his lineage. "Ben mentioned you guys have a really good technology course?"

Hiro perked up. "Yes, we do." He agreed. "Auradon Accelerated was derived from a science and technology college only. We still remain ahead of every other college in Auradon for our technology courses. Maybe you'd be interested in taking a look around the original building, where some of our best technology labs are?"

Carlos let out a small smile. "That'd be fantastic." He agreed.

Hiro smiled and pulled three maps and pamphlets out of his pocket. "Auradon Accelerated has almost four-hundred different classes. We have students from all over Auradon, and outside of our classes, we have numerous extracurricular activities." Hiro unfolded one pamphlet, which resembled a small children's booklet with how thick it was. "You can find short descriptions of out-of-school activities here. Right now, all our activity sign-ups where you can ask questions if you're interested are on the west side." Hiro pointed behind him. Off in the far distance, Ben could see many small stands and hear many loud voices. "As far as classes go, most teachers will be in their rooms with the exception of myself and the original Big Hero Six team. So, Wasabi Shoga, Honey-Lemon Meil, Fredrick Fredrickson, and Gogo Tomago." Hiro used air quotation marks around each of his friend's nicknames.

"I thought Gogo changed her last name when she got married a few years ago?" Ben blurted out. "I could have sworn I read about it in the paper."

Hiro chuckled. "Um, yeah. It's just that Fred gave us all nicknames, and hers happens to have a last-name nickname. Her real name was Leiko Tanaka, but she did change it to Hamada after we got married."

"Oh." Ben trailed off as he stared at the white band on Hiro's finger.

"Anyway." Hiro waved the subject off. "We have technology, math, science, language courses, interior design, childcare, art, several different types of sports including tourney, law, everything under the sun."

"Do you have classes where you can design clothes?" Evie asked, suddenly perking up. Hiro smiled.

"Absolutely." He confirmed, annunciating each syllable. "There's several, actually. We have an entire career training course for apparel design." He turned to Jay. "What are you interested in?"

Jay shrugged and looked around him. "Not sure yet." He mumbled harshly. Ben felt his heart sink a little.

Hiro looked for a moment like he might press, but instead, he refolded the pamphlet he was holding and handed a map and a pamphlet to each of them. "Alright, well have fun exploring today. Carlos, if you want I can walk you to the labs and Wasabi and Honey can show you around. Have fun you guys, and, uh, duck!"
The last word threw Ben off for a second longer than he liked to admit before he heard a loud whirring and immediately crouched to the ground. Evie, Carlos, and an entire section of people behind them all hit the ground. The only person who remained standing was Jay, who caught the object flying towards them, a lighted frisbee that was playing fast-paced music out of mini speakers embedded in the sides, and held it for a few seconds, turning it over in his hands.

"Throw it back!" Someone demanded from a grassy area about twenty feet away. Jay looked at the disk in his hands, then whirled it under her arm experimentally. He launched it out over the heads of the group of kids playing, who shouted in surprise and immediately dashed away before it could get caught in a tree fifty yards away.

Hiro looked impressed. He clapped Jay on the shoulder before the taller man could back away. "You should take a look at the sports conditioning section." He advised. "Anyway, have a great day, guys. Carlos, are you coming?"

Carlos looked hesitantly at Evie and Jay. Evie nodded and waved him away, but Jay remained stone-faced. After a few seconds, Carlos split off the group and began to trail along behind Hiro.

"You have your phone, Carlos?" Ben asked the retreating boy. Carlos whirled on his foot and continued walking backward as he gave Ben a double thumbs-up, which was a lot of progress from him not looking at him and refusing to speak to him. Within seconds, he'd dissolved into the crowd of people around him.

Evie turned to Ben. She took a small breath and refused to meet his eyes. "I want to see what he was talking about with the apparel design course." She announced firmly, as if she thought Ben would refuse her.

"Would you like to go alone, or with us?" Ben asked kindly.

Evie hesitated. "Actually… I'd like to go alone, if you don't mind." She glanced at Jay apologetically.

"Of course." Ben agreed. Evie looked a little surprised. "Please keep your phone on you in case you need us." He told her. "I'll text around lunchtime and we can figure out what we want to do."

Evie nodded, looking like she was in a daze, and unfolded her map. She traced the paths with her finger and then turned towards the south. "Bye Jay. Bye Ben."

"Bye Evie." Ben waved as the blue-haired girl squared her shoulders and began to power-walk away. People's head turned to watch her as she went. It wasn't a surprise – Evie was the fairest of them all. However, she was still an Isle kid, and Ben was more than confident in her ability to deck anyone who tried to cross her. He just hoped she'd be reasonable about it like Mal had been.

Ben turned to Jay. "Want to head through the campus activities and see if anything catches your eye?" He asked.

Jay didn't say anything, but he started to walk away from Ben, towards the activities. Ben followed in silence.

Hiro hadn't been joking when he'd said they had a lot of activities. There were several different language clubs for French, German, English, and Mandarin, among others. There were writing and editing clubs, book clubs, math clubs, study groups, and art groups. He saw two different debate teams which he assumed went head-to-head a lot, a star-gazing group, a therapy group, an adventure club, and a technology club. There was piano, string instruments, photography, the list
went on. But Jay didn't hover by any for more than a few seconds, and he didn't ask any questions. He watched, a little interested when Ben paused to participate in a quick sword fight, which he won with a hand pinned behind his back. Still, Jay didn't participate in anything.

Finally, after almost forty minutes, he sat down on an empty bench. Ben tentatively sat beside him. It was almost eleven-thirty. Ben would need to text Carlos and Evie soon, and Jay was still upset.

He didn't dare say anything as he sat still and prayed for something, anything to happen. Just one opportunity for the boy to open up a little.

After several minutes of silence, Jay cleared his throat and said, in a rough tone: "You gonna try and get me to sign up for anything?"

"Not if you don't want to." Ben shook his head. "I've just felt bad that you're all stuck inside the castle while Mal's gone, and I wanted you to have the opportunity to explore and see what there was."

"Carlos and Evie will want to go here." Jay sighed, running his hands through his hair.

"Maybe." Ben agreed. "There are other places though. And we can always have someone come to the castle to teach them if they want."

"Is that what they did with you?" Jay asked.

"No," Ben admitted. "I went to Auradon prep. Graduated at eighteen, and all my friends immediately went to college. But I already knew what I was supposed to be, so instead of going to college, my parents started training me to run the kingdom. I didn't ever have the opportunity to come and see what college was like. It looks fun." He watched couples walking down the path and imagined what it'd be like to walk around with Mal like that. He could picture them elbowing each other off the path, holding hands, and walking with their arms around each other and their hands in each other's back pockets. It would have been nice to have dated without knowing the imminent.

"They're going to want to go," Jay repeated. "I can already tell this is a place they'd love."

"How so?" Ben asked, pulling one foot up into the seat as he turned his body towards Jay. After a few seconds, Jay turned and met Ben's eyes.

"They act the same way Mal does with you." He said very softly. "Like they have a place, and they don't want to let it go."

Ben tapped his fingers on his knee. This was it; this was his chance to connect with Jay. He prayed to whatever god there was out there to please, don't let him screw this up. "I hope Mal is happy." He said softly. "That's all that really matters to me."

"I think she is," Jay muttered. "It's just... hard. For a long time, it was her and I, backing each other up on the Isle, and then we got Carlos and Evie later and we... worked together. Now, she's gone, and she and I were the original dream-team." He paused. "Not romantically, of course." He told Ben. "But we learned to survive by working together. And now everyone's gone, and I feel like there's no one to back me up, I guess."

Ben couldn't imagine how hard it must be for Jay, the son of Jafar, to admit this. But he patted the man's shoulder and an idea suddenly struck him. "Do you want to play a round of tourney with me?" He asked.

Jay scrunched his eyebrows together. "Tourney?" He asked.
Twenty minutes later, Ben and Jay were walking across a tourney field where a long line of boys interested in playing were crowded along the sidelines. "Excuse me, coach." Ben tapped a man with dark skin in white slacks on the shoulder. "This young man has never seen a tourney game, never touched a paddle, and hadn't even heard of the game until today. Any chance he and I can play a quick round together with your practices, so he can get a feel for it? Not to try out, or anything?"

The coach sized them up. He must have realized this was King Ben but didn't say a word. "Sure." He agreed. "There's some basic equipment over there. You make sure to explain the idea of the game to your friend, and then get in line behind the people waiting to go on the field. If he gets hit in the kill zone, he has to jump out for the next person in line. If the opposing team scores, your entire team swaps out for the next group. Nine people per team for trial games."

"Thanks, Coach." Ben nodded. He put a hand on Jay's shoulder and led him to where the school-issued equipment for basic classes was piled. The teams had their own nicer equipment, but these were for general student use.

Ben showed Jay how to slip on the armor and the jersey, and then how to fasten the helmet around his head. They got into line behind about twenty other boys who were bouncing eagerly from foot to foot, waiting to play.

"That's the kill zone." Ben pointed to the area in the middle of the field. "They're allowed to shoot you if you're in the kill zone. Get hit, and you have to come back into line here."

"That's what happened to me." The boy in front of them said mournfully. "I was so close too!"

The line was moving quickly. Ben scrambled to remember what he'd wanted to say next. "You want to try and get the ball into the goal using the paddle. You can't touch it with your hands, and-"

"I got it," Jay said harshly. His eyes skimmed the field. There were only six people in front of them now. "Let's do this."

Ben suddenly had a few doubts.

Someone scored. The overseer blew the whistle and the other team rushed off the field as the line surged forward. Ben turned to see where Jay was, but Jay had already rushed past him and onto the field. He hurried to get into place before the overseer blew the whistle again, and the scrimmage began.

Jay completely dominated the fields. He rushed the boy on the other team, who had the ball. He knocked him down by brutally shoving his elbow into his hip and lifting to send him up off the ground before catching the ball mid-air, mid-jump. Then, he rushed to the kill zone. The team members behind the launchers, who had apparently been half-asleep, began to fire in a hurried manner. Jay ducked, dodged, and even did a back-flip over a foam ball, all without losing the ball in his paddle. Ben didn't dare follow through the kill zone as Jay rushed to the other end of the field, knocking everyone out of his way. Within two minutes, the game had been won. All members of the other team, except for two had been knocked to the ground, walked off the floor. One was the goalie, who had run for his life the moment he'd seen Jay coming. The whistle blew.

"You!" The coach yelled. "Get over here!"

The surrounding groups of students were going crazy as Jay walked towards the coach in
confusion. Ben followed in concern.

The coach threw his clipboard to the ground. "You say you've never played tourney before? What do you call that?" He bellowed. Jay didn't dare shrink, and the coach's mouth broke out from a scowl into a smile. "That's raw talent, lad!" He exclaimed. "Come find me later, and I'll show you something you haven't seen before; it's called a rulebook. And if you want a spot on the tourney team for Auradon Accelerated, you've got it!"

The other kids on the field looked surprised. Even Jay looked shocked. "The team?" He asked. "You mean, I could do this every day?"

"We don't practice Sundays." The coach corrected Jay. "But there's early morning practices and after-class practices and in-class workouts, not to mention playing against other schools for the entire team; the mix!"

Jay looked amazed. Ben smiled and patted his shoulder. "Well." He said. "Looks like you don't need me anymore." He began to walk off the field as Jay looked after him and then turned to head back onto the field.

Ben sat on a bench and did work on his tablet while Jay played game after game of tourney on the field. People took sly pictures of him and posted them on social media with captions like: "I think my eyes are lying", "KING BEN", and "someone's missing their queen." Ben occasionally skimmed the news updates as they showed up, but overall stayed focused on placating Doug, who was complaining about all the paperwork Mal hadn't been able to complete and file before she'd left.

Around 12:45, Ben received a text from Evie. She said: "Are we planning on meeting up for lunch?"

Ben texted back and said: "Yes" before he opened a text group with Evie and Carlos and asked: "What do you guys want for lunch? Pizza, sandwiches, what do you feel like?"

He asked the coach to pull Jay off the field, and soon the two of them were walking towards a student favorites shop off the north side of the campus. Evie and Carlos were already there. As they approached, Jay rushed ahead to his friends.

"Guys, you wouldn't believe what I did." Jay started. "I got invited to the Auradon Accelerated Tourney Team!"

"I got to see the labs in the technology center," Carlos exclaimed with a bright smile. "Wasabi, who's one of the teachers, showed me their high-tech 3D-Printer."

"Have you guys signed up for anything?" Ben asked as they stepped into line.

Evie shook her head. "I didn't think we could. Transportation and money and all."

They ordered and went to sit beside the window. Ben twiddled his thumbs around his cup. "I don't want to pressure any of you, but I'd totally support you guys coming to school here. You could live on campus and come to the castle for Christmas and holidays. We'd even help you out with money, and you guys could totally do everything you want if you're up to it. It'd help you get started for life anywhere you would like in Auradon, in any form you want it."

Evie, Jay, and Carlos exchanged looks and then turned to Ben as one.
"What about Mal?" Evie asked.

Ben exhaled and set his cup down. "Maybe Mal would like to come. I don't know. She technically doesn't have to live at the castle and could live here, or on the Isle, or even in the moors if she wanted. She does have her two kingdoms she has to run though. I don't know what she'd choose to do." He did, actually, and felt a twinge of guilt for lying to Mal's friends, but figured it would be better for them to hear the truth from Mal's mouth rather than them assuming he was trying to separate the four of them.

Ben's eyes flickered down to the table, and then he looked back at the kids around him. "We could call her tonight and ask if you want."

"Call?" Evie asked. "She hasn't answered any of my texts or calls since she left."

Ben would have shifted his weight if he'd been standing up. "I've got a way to get a hold of her." He admitted sheepishly. "I don't use it that often since when she's at the moors that's kind of her alone time, but I can still talk to her if needed. I'll show you guys later." He hoped she'd be able to talk, and that the recent barrier breach wouldn't mean she'd refuse his calls.

They nodded and didn't say any more on the subject. Instead, Evie told them all about the different things she'd seen, from professional design software to industrial sewing equipment. Jay recounted the story of the coach throwing his clipboard to the ground, and Carlos talked about Gogo Tomago, who had been racing around campus on her old yellow wheels.

They finished their lunch. Evie and Carlos wanted to return to the campus to begin looking at classes and meeting teachers now that there was a possibility they might be able to attend the school, and Jay wanted to return to the tourney field and play until he dropped dead.

As they walked back across the street onto campus, there was a loud crash from down the street. "Dude!" Someone yelled. The four young adults' heads whipped around toward the direction of the crash. Ben was shocked to see a service animal rushing down the street towards them. It was being chased by a larger, meaner dog. Behind the two animals, a store's outside display was rolling around on the ground. Ben was even more surprised when an inhumane shriek came from behind him. He scarcely had time to whirl around before Carlos leaped vertically and clung to a lamppost beside him, about five feet from the ground, where he continued to yell in a panicked tone.

Ben scooped up the first dog as it dashed around and held it close to him. It was a service dog, so he assumed it wouldn't bite. The second dog snarled from a second, but Ben used his foot to push it away, and it turned and scurried back into a nearby alleyway. The service dog's owner was running down the street exasperatedly. "Dude!" She called. "I'm so sorry!" She apologized to Ben.

"No problem," Ben assured her. He looked up to Carlos. "Carlos!" He called. "Are you okay?"

"Ben! Ben!" Carlos called back down. There was a wild, panicked look in his eye. "Put that thing down! It's a rabid, wild pack animal that will chase you down and rip out your throat!"

Several passersby stared as Ben blinked uncomprehendingly at the young man. "Um, Carlos, this is a service animal. They don't bite. I think you're thinking wolves, not dogs."

"Wolves?" Carlos asked in a feeble voice.

"Yeah." Ben nodded. He continued to pet the dog in his arms as the owner stood a few feet away, anxiously rubbing her hands. "Haven't you ever met a dog before? Come on down. I promise he doesn't bite."
"He doesn't!" The girl exclaimed. "He's actually a very good dog! He just gets a little excited. He's the campus mutt. It's my turn to take him everywhere because they haven't gotten him trained enough to give him to a disabled person." She let out a dramatic sigh. "I honestly think we should have just put him up for adoption." She grumbled.

Carlos was inching his way down the post. "He… doesn't look like a rabid mutt." He muttered to himself. Ben held the dog out awkwardly as Carlos carefully took a few steps forward and watched Ben scratch the pup behind his ears. "What's his name?" He asked.

"This is Dude," The girl announced. "He's been in training for almost thirteen months. He's going to be a service animal one day if he can remember to stay by his owner."

"What's a service dog?" Evie asked curiously. She leaned over and scratched the dog behind his ears a little.

"They help people with disabilities in Auradon," Ben explained. "For example, if someone is blind, they can get a service dog to help lead them around. Or if they suffer from panic attacks, then a small, quiet service dog could help them stay calm."

"That's… really cool." Carlos whispered. Following Ben's example, he slowly reached out and began to gently scratch the dog behind his ears. Dude leaned into his hand and then licked the bottom of his hand.

The dog's owner laughed. "He likes you." She informed Carlos, who looked amazed.

Ben put Dude on the ground and Carlos knelt down on the sidewalk to continue petting Dude as the girl picked up Dude's leash. "If you're planning on being a student, chances are you'll see him a lot more." She told Carlos. "He's being shuffled from student to student each week until we either release him to be adopted or until he's fully trained." She rolled her eyes. "I have to go get lunch now, so can I take him?"

"Yeah, of course." Carlos nodded as he began to stand up. He happened to stick his hand out, palm up, and Dude placed in paw in Carlos's grip in a doggy handshake. Carlos looked amazed. "Pleased to meet you too." He whispered, and then got to his feet.

Ben smiled at the young lady as she pulled Dude back to her feet. "Thank you for letting us meet your dog." He told her. "Have a nice lunch."

"You as well!" She beamed, then faltered. "Erm, unless you already had lunch. But still, have a nice day!" She began to walk in the direction of the nearby shops.

"You too!" Ben called. He turned towards his little group and smiled at Carlos. "Looks like you made a new friend." He told the white-haired teen.

"Yeah." Carlos shrugged. "I guess I did."

That night, everyone gathered in Ben and Mal's bathroom as Ben hauled out the large stone basin. He set it on the counter, and then his phone began to buzz insistently in his pocket. He pulled it out and answered the call. "Hello?" He asked.

"Ben, hi, good to see you," Doug said, sounding like he was rushing around again. "Listen, Mal wasn't able to clear border approval for the team that was hired to forge an Interweb for the Isle, and that's scheduled to happen tomorrow. Is there any way she can waive the border from a distance? She hasn't approved anyone to work from Auradon with her."
"Oh, I was just about to call her. I'll ask." Ben sighed. "Can't I just sign off for her?"

"You're not approved." Doug sighed. "Eliza Deavor has permission to page Auradon from the Isle, and you have permission to receive her official statements and page them to her in the Moors. She's written it out very clearly here."

"She probably wouldn't mind..." Ben trailed off, doubtful. Doug began to laugh on the other end of the phone.

"After you pulled three citizens off without her permission? I'd say you're pushing it. You know, it's not exactly fair for you to keep her apart from Auradon and then keep putting your nose into Isle matters. It's not your kingdom anymore, Ben." Doug sighed. "Well, I need you to ask Mal about that, otherwise I'll be forced to cancel ahead for her. Geesh, she sets all these things up to happen when she's gone, doesn't she?"

Ben exhaled. Doug was right. Mal was protective of her people, and just because it had been months since she'd last snapped at him for the Isle didn't mean it wouldn't happen again. "Yeah, she does. I'll ask her and get back to you, Doug. I swear." Then he hung up and turned his attention back to the basin, putting his phone back in his pocket. He stared at the size of it. It was good for a one-to-one conversation, but he wasn't sure all three of Mal's friends would be able to crowd around it.

Ben put the basin in the bathtub and began to fill it with warm, clear water. Then, when the water had risen just enough to cover the top of the basin, he called everyone over.

"I've never tried calling her like this." He admitted. "If it doesn't work, I'll have to haul the basin out and you might have to take turns. Hold your breath and cross your fingers." He drummed his fingers on the side of the tub and then told the water: "Mal."

The water surface stilled completely, and the perimeter of the water meniscus began to glow. The water turned its familiar silver, and then the picture of the moors appeared. The water sprite who usually greeted Ben appeared and gurgled happily to see him. At least the King of Auradon was popular among the river people.

"Wow," Carlos muttered. He reached out and brushed a hand through the water. The picture broke as silver ripples crossed over it but then reformed.

"Could you please get Mal for us?" Ben asked the sprite. It began to gurgle louder and more excited than ever. A pixie flew by and waved at them, chattering excitedly. Ben became aware of someone arguing nearby. He strained his ears and the most unique thing happened. Mal's voice broke through the water, but it was like it was covered by something, and she was rolling her words around in her mouth as she spoke.

"The barrier wholed I've and Auradon whole gave us for their violence. I another word won't give on the violence." She demanded.

"Auradon trickery in time has. King Ben innocent may, his country blood seeks now." Someone protested. Ben almost couldn't understand them.

"Wrong!" Mal objected. "Ben's country change has! You your ways have locked!"

"Mal?" Ben called cautiously.

Silence fell over the area on the other side. "Is someone there?" Mal's voice came through the water, sounding normal again.
"Over here, Mal," Ben called.

Mal's face appeared, looking down into the water but up at them. Her horns were out and her had fairies braiding her hair. Evie sat down beside Ben in shock. She looked very surprised. "Why, hello!" Mal announced and turned over her shoulder. "Finally, someone who will listen to me when I explain things to them." She looked back down. "It's very late. Why are you calling? Is something the matter?"

"Not at all," Ben assured her. "What were you saying back there? About Auradon giving violence?"

Mal blinked. "Your ears our language can touch?" She asked. The muffled tone had returned to her voice.

Ben's mouth dropped open. "Are you speaking in a different language right now?" He gasped.

"Faesh," Mal replied with a bright, disbelieving smile. "I wasn't talking about Auradon giving us violence. In Faesh, the subjects come before we explain about them. So, what I was actually saying was that Auradon gave us, well, you apologized for it, but there isn't a word for that in Faesh. Instead of apologizing, you make reparations. So I was basically trying to explain that Auradon... made whole the problem with the attack? Well, I don't know if the word attack translates correctly either, but-"

"It was violence." Ben nodded. "It translated as violence."

"Interesting." Mal smiled. "Well, now I know this can translate. That's handy. Now, what's going on? Are you carrying through any messages for me?"

"One." Ben nodded. "From Doug. You never approved your interweb team to cross into your barrier. Other than that, nothing has been paged up from the Isle, though. Evie, Jay, and Carlos had something they wanted to talk to you about, and of course, I'll never turn down a chance to see how beautiful you are."

Mal gasped. "The interweb!" She exclaimed and covered her face. "I'll travel to the edge of the moorlands tomorrow and try to fix it from a distance. If not, can you ask the Fairy Godmother if she can take a quick trip over to let them in?"

Ben nodded. "Do you want me to sign off your papers for you?" He asked.

Mal shook her head. "No. Don't touch them. I don't want your name on any Isle papers in case the Isle starts to get guarded. And for the record, Ben, I really need you to back off of the Isle and the moorlands for, like a few months while I patch things up here. I get that you're fascinated with magic, but the moorlands think you're going to try and press them off again because you keep poking."

Ben deflated. "Okay." He sighed. "Doug warned me of that, like, five minutes ago. He said I asked you to stay out of Auradon, so I need to keep out of the moors and the Isle."

Mal frowned. "Well, he's right, but also... I don't really want to be separate from Auradon, so I understand how you feel." She sighed and shifted position to sit more comfortably as she talked. "There are things I don't like about Auradon and things I want to fix, but I can't do much without being biased or people thinking I'm trying to take over. I'm sure you feel similar about my kingdoms."

"So-so," Ben agreed. "I don't necessarily hate anything, but I understand what you're saying. And
there are things I want to fix about Auradon too. I'm just trying to not... step on my parent's work too much."

"Their work doesn't matter," Mal reminded him with a frown. "You're king. You decide what's best. If something's wrong, you need to fix it."

Ben shifted his weight. "I know, I'm just... what do you want to change anyway?"

"I want your laws against magic gone," Mal stated, eyeing Ben with a pointed look. Evie, Jay, and Carlos all looked between Ben and Mal. It was one thing for them to see the King of Auradon treating their friend fairly, but another to watch her demand something so... drastic.

"Me too," Ben sighed. He swallowed and then began to stand up. "Well, I got the chance to see you, so I suppose we'd better let your friends get a look of you in all your magical glory."

"This isn't my magical glory. I don't have my wings out." Mal laughed and then ran her fingertips past her horns. "But I don't think you've seen me with my horns yet, have you? By the way, how did you get the frame to be so much larger?"

"We put the basin in the bathtub and filled it over the top." Ben shrugged. "Lucky guess." He paused. "Are you going to bring out your wings? Because if you are, I want to see them before I go."

Mal laughed and pulled her hair forward over her shoulders before her wings appeared behind her shoulders, stretching over her head. Ben exhaled in amazement. He set a hand on Evie's shoulder. "Well, I'll leave you guys to it." He told her. "Call me back in so I can say goodbye, okay?" Evie said nothing as she stared at Mal's wings and horns.

"Okay," Carlos said for Evie. "And, Ben!" He called as Ben began to back out of the bathroom. "Thank you." Carlos smiled, and then they turned towards Mal's image in the water. Evie was picking up their registration packets as Ben closed the door. He heard her say: "Ben took us somewhere today," And then all was silent.

Or, almost all was silent.

"Hey." A boy with white hair, a blue hoodie, and bare feet said as he sat on the sofa, facing Ben. Snowflakes materialized about his head and frost crept at his feet, which was what Ben had noticed first before he'd even seen the boy. "Lovely evening, isn't it?"

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Disney Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, 101 Dalmanations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Big Hero Six, Coco, Star Wars, The Incredibles 1 & 2, or Dreamworks Rise of the Guardians.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Jack Frost leaves Ben. Ben receives a disastrous call from the Isle and Jay punches Ben. Ben and Mal have a conversation and the Isle Rush begins.

Chapter Notes

I got back into reception to 104 emails. Thanks Guys!

Ben pressed a hand to his chest as he stared at the young man in the room. He was sitting on the back of the sofa, balancing carefully as one bare foot swung back and forth. A long shepherd's crook was tucked under his arm as the young man carefully molded snowflakes out of thin air.

The boy looked out under his long, shaggy locks and smirked at Ben in a way that was almost similar to Mal's smirk. "Hello?" He asked.

"Hello," Ben gasped as he relaxed. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were there." He straightened his suit and took a few calming breaths to recover from the shock.

The boy's face fell dramatically. He stared at the ground as snowflakes settled on his hoodie. "Not many do," he sighed, glancing out to the window. He stood up on the couch and swung the staff up over his shoulders as he walked off the sofa's back and onto a table without either making a sound, as if he were weightless. "It's a wonder you can see me at all. I was a little worried that I'd have to find some way to convince you. Must be how used to magic you are." He continued in a mournful tone. Ben observed the way the snow followed him.

He didn't seem to weigh anything but he wasn't see-through. Ben had never seen anything like him before, but if he was from the moors that would make sense. "Are you a spirit?" he asked as he picked a plush chair sitting against the wall and sat down to face the newcomer as he took a stroll upon the tables and chairs in his and Mal's living space.

The boy shrugged. "I don't know what you'd call us." He said honestly. "I come from a... different place?"

He jumped down and sat on the end of the table he'd previously been walking on, about eight feet from Ben.

Ben cocked his head. "Are you from the moors?" he asked.

"What?" The white-haired boy asked. "Never mind." He stopped Ben before he could speak. "No, I'm not from anywhere in Auradon. My name is Jack Frost."

"Jack Frost?" Ben asked cautiously. His mind leaped to the immortal villain Jack Frost, who now
resided on the Isle.

"I know you guys have a Jack Frost too." Jack held up his hands. "But... we're different. I think he's a blizzard incarnation, and I'm a moon incarnation."

"A moon incarnation?" Ben asked. "I'm sorry, I don't know that much about magic. If my wife was here, she might know what you were talking about."

"The queen's not here?" Jack jumped up and flitted away from Ben.

"No, but I can pass on a message?" Ben asked, standing up and taking a concerned step forward.

"No, no. That's fine. I was just hoping to... talk to her." Jack wilted.

Ben frowned. "Is it anything I might be able to help with?" He asked.

"Well..." Jack hesitated. "It actually is all about you and Auradon as a whole, but... I was kind of hoping to be able to talk to her and you at the same time because, y'know, she's like me and..."

"You're magical," Ben stated calmly.

Jack straightened his shoulders. "Yeah, I am." He narrowed his eyes as if he thought Ben might have something negative to say about that.

"That's fine." Ben held up his hands in surrender. "Well, Mal won't be back until the first of August. You can feel free to stay until then or you can talk to me. I'd even be willing to let you call Mal. She wouldn't be there physically, but you could still talk to her if that'd help."

"No." Jack shook his head. He was creeping closer to the window. "I'll just... wait until she gets back. Sorry for barging in."

Ben felt increasing alarm as Jack put a hand on the windowsill. "Wait, I can have someone escort you, or I could even do it myself if you-" He began to protest.

Jack opened the window and jumped up on the pane. Ben's eyes went wide. "Wait!" He yelled as Jack gave a quick wave and suddenly vanished. He ran to the open window and stared down at the ground in horror until a shadow flew past him. He looked up to see Jack soaring away on the wind, heading southeast, almost as if he was headed to the Isle of the Lost. He was already out of earshot, so Ben didn't bother calling after him. Instead, he sank to the floor as the adrenaline faded out of his system.

The bathroom door opened, and Carlos peeked out. He stared at Ben on the floor. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Ben stood back up, still shaking.

"What are you doing over there?" Carlos asked as Ben pulled the window shut.

"Nothing." Ben sighed. "Uh, are you guys done?"

"Just about," Carlos answered. "Here, come on in." He gave Ben none-too-few weird looks as he brushed his knees off and walked towards the bathroom.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Carlos commented. "Did you throw up out the window or something?"
"No," Ben replied as a heavy red blush set into his cheeks.

"Why is there slush melting on the back of the couch?" Carlos asked.

"No reason." Ben slipped into the bathroom. Evie and Jay looked up as they heard his footfalls. Mal was still there, looking up out of the water. When she saw Ben, her eyes lit up and her smile grew brighter, and she waved, but otherwise remained focused on Evie. Jay crossed his arms and glared at Ben harshly.

"The thing is..." Evie was telling Mal, "I don't want you to feel like you're being left alone again. Ben actually mentioned that if you wanted to come with us you could, and-

"No." Mal interrupted. "Hold on, please. I'm so, so happy you're going to be able to do this, but I've got two kingdoms to run. Both are at very pivotal moments in their development. I can't do that plus school. I don't even need school." Mal threaded her fingers through her purple locks, which were back down to her shoulder blades. "I know I'm not alone, and that I can always come to visit you if we want. And you'll have your phones, so you can call, and – Evie – You're going to be so, so amazing. I can't even imagine what you'll end up doing. You totally need this. It'll help you be spectacular. My path has already been decided. By me. Not by Ben or the palace. And I'm happy with where I am. I can't go to college right now, but if you go, I'll be so, so proud of you."

Evie had deflated during Mal's speech like a balloon, but she still nodded. "Is that everything you wanted to tell me?" Mal asked.

The four villain kids exchanged looks, and then Jay nodded without a word.

"Can I say hi to Ben, then?" Mal asked.

Evie and Jay scooted a little so that Ben was able to kneel beside them. "Hey." He said, waving a little.

"Hey, babe." Mal smiled. Ben's cheeks went a little pink. Jay crossed his arms and bit down hard on his tongue. Ben swallowed and put his hands in his pockets.

"Hey." He repeated, then cleared his throat. "I miss you." He told her.

"Miss you too," Mal replied, shooting a little glance at Jay. It was beyond clear that she disapproved of his continued disapproval, but it wasn't like she could force Jay to like Ben. "Sounds like you're keeping busy though. Are you sleeping now that the spell is broken?"

"So far, so good," Ben admitted. "It's actually rather nice."

"What, to have that entire gigantic space to yourself and not have to share with me?" She laughed.

"No, just the fact I can fall asleep again. I miss you." Ben reminded her. Mal laughed again.

"Well," She said. "Thanks for calling again. Everyone has been bogging me down and trying to convince me I need to raise defenses. I swear Ben, if you do this to me ever again, I'm going to make you come and explain everything to them. But hopefully, I'll be able to quell the tides. I'll be home soon. You should pick out a new movie I haven't seen yet. I don't think I've ever seen Sleeping Beauty."

"You'd want to see Sleeping Beauty?" Carlos asked incredulously.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. "I've actually met Aurora, and she's very nice. Her daughter on the other
hand..." Mal rolled her eyes. "Let's just say she's very different."

Ben groaned and stared at the ceiling. "It's not lusting if we love each other!" He mimicked and rolled his eyes.

Mal laughed. "She can't be a very passionate woman, can she?" She repeated.

None of the villain kids said anything, so Ben waved to Mal. "Well, I'll see you soon, okay? Do you think everything will be okay over there?"

"Yeah." Mal's eyes lit up. "I really want you to come and talk to everyone, non-politics related. You're still relatively liked. A lot of the others here want to see you too. Do you think maybe we could steal you away for a week?"

"Maybe." Ben shrugged. "I'll pass the idea by Mom." He hesitated. "Maybe if we make it before Auradon Accelerated's fall semester starts up, Evie, Jay, and Carlos could join us."

"I'll ask." Mal nodded enthusiastically. "Anyways, I'm going to bed now. Get some sleep."

"Now that I can." Ben chuckled. "Okay, bye!" Mal waved her hand, and then the water faded back to clear. Ben pulled the plug on the tub and emptied out the basin as the Villain Kids stood up in silence. An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

"What did she say?" Ben asked.

"She liked our ideas a lot," Carlos muttered. "She was really happy for us."

"That's good," Ben said as he hefted the basin out of the tub and replaced it on a corner of the counter. "Is there something you need to ask me?"

No one said anything. Ben pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the counter. One by one, they folded their arms and began to glare at the ground. Finally, Evie, in the smallest voice he'd ever heard her use, began: "I guess we're just shocked by how different she is."

Ben exhaled and hunched his shoulders. "It must be hard." He empathized. "I mean, I get surprised by how different she is just coming back from the moorlands every month. She comes back and she's glowing and stronger and more beautiful. I can't imagine missing a year." A lock of hair fell in front of his face. Like Mal, his hair was getting long.

"When did she give up on evil?" Evie asked, squeezing her eyes shut.

"From the very beginning," Ben explained. "I think she mostly did it out of revenge to her mom at first, but then she decided that she didn't like being good, and she didn't like being bad, and that was when she went to the moors and became something else entirely."

"And this is her life now, for good?" Evie's lip wobbled.

Ben shook his head. "I'm not entitled to make those decisions." He reminded them. "But I don't think she'll want to leave. Guys, I'm sorry, but she's queen now. She's got an entire prophesy that states she'll unify Auradon and repair all the mistakes our country has made."

Carlos exhaled. "We get it." He whispered. "We heard the coronation blessings. We watched everything we could from the Isle. It's just... going to be hard for us to wrap our heads around it. Around you." He sighed and swallowed. "You're a good man, Ben. It's just hard to know she left us behind for you."
Ben's heart plummeted into his stomach. "She never wanted to." He blurted out. "She tried to see you guys in her Auradon life before she left. In the clothes and the note you wrote to her and in-"

"Ben," Carlos interrupted. "You don't have to lie to make us feel better."

"She wrote you a note," Ben continued. "I watched her print it. She wrote a note to the Isle of the Lost before I told her Auradon screens the mail that's sent, and she took it and put it somewhere. Ask her about it when she gets back."


"Of course," Ben mumbled. He watched as the three of them gathered up registration packets and class itineraries. They wouldn't have to formally apply since Hiro Hamada had approved the three of them, but it was still up to them to register and put their schedules together. Ben had a feeling they'd all hang out in Evie's room tonight and stay up pouring out over everything. He followed them to the door and said goodnight as they disappeared. Then, he returned to the bathroom to dry the basin and put it back in its official place.

Jay hated him. Hated his guts and wished he could never see him again, probably. Ben had no idea what sort of history Jay had with Mal, but could only imagine how just Jay must have been over anything. That was a type of hurt that tourney games and college opportunities just couldn't fix. Evie was also hurt, also disliked him. She seemed to be having trouble accepting the Mal she'd assumed was living in the palace with the person Mal actually was, where Jay seemed to be having trouble connecting fifteen-year-old Mal to seventeen-year-old Mal. But Evie was slowly, slowly rationalizing through the situation and taking everything in. Out of the three, Carlos was having the easiest time. Not that it was an easy transition, but the young man was making leaps and bounds. Carlos was accepting Ben, accepting Mal's lifestyle, and looking forward a little. It was interesting to watch the three work through everything, though Ben's heart went out to them.

The second time Ben was summoned in the middle of the night for a phone call, it was close to two am and he was fast asleep. Shaken out of his stupor by another nighttime palace attendant, he couldn't even comprehend what he was being told until he'd swung his feet off the bed and sat up.

"What?" He gasped as he blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

"Urgent call from the Isle," An attendant informed him. "You need to get up to take it right now, please."

Ben nodded and began to walk to the door. He paused briefly to grab a bathrobe from his closet and then he and the attendant exited the room and into the hallway. 'I can find my way to the queen's office by myself," Ben told them. "Thank you for coming to get me." The attendant nodded, and he and Ben parted ways. Ben immediately set on his way to the offices.

As he neared the entryway, he heard the distinct sound of the front doors opening and frowned. Guards were usually set to patrol either inside or outside on the rare occasions that the royal family, who happened to routinely house a magical enchantress, required protection. There shouldn't be anyone coming inside or outside. Ben took a few steps into the entryway and almost collided with a figure in dark leather. "Jay?" He gasped.

Jay looked as startled as Ben did, and his expression quickly morphed into one of intense hostility. He had obviously come from outside, and Ben wondered what he'd been doing. Jay scowled. "Are you tailing me?" he snapped.
"What? No, no," Ben tried to step around Jay. "I'm headed towards Mal's office real quick. You can feel free to head outside whenever. Now, pardon me, she has an urgent call coming in from the Isle."

Jay blocked his path and straightened up. "Well, I guess I'd better come with you, considering I lived there. I might be able to offer advice."

Ben winced internally. He should have just stopped at 'the office'. "This is from the city, Jay, not from the old Isle. And I'm not making any decisions; I'm just taking the call and delivering the message." But Jay crossed his arms and deflated. There was no way he could politely refuse the other man without Jay thinking that he was trying to hide something. With a sigh, turned and continued to Mal's office with Jay hot on his heels. He'd forgotten how exhausting it was to have an Islander constantly looking down on him. It wasn't that he didn't like Jay; it was that he knew Jay still hated him and he wasn't quite sure how the Islander would act without one of his better-reasoning friends around.

Ben opened Mal's office door and flipped on the light. Jay took up guard at the door as Ben swallowed and began to examine Mal's computer. Her system, unfortunately, was completely different from his as she had adapted the methods to suit a completely different government. Ben sighed and pulled out his phone to page a palace technician. While the app was open, he coyly summoned for a palace guard, just in case.

"What are you doing?" Jay demanded, stepping forward to examine Ben's motions.

Ben exhaled and put his phone away in his bathrobe pocket. He understood not being liked, but he wished Jay wouldn't be so... antagonizing. "I've never used Mal's computer," Ben admitted with a gesture at Mal's system. "I can't turn it on."

Jay furrowed his brow and Ben sighed, taking a little seat on the edge of Mal's desk as he pondered what to say. "How is it outside?" He asked.

Jay scrunched up his face. "If you're wondering why I was outside, it's none of your business, Your Majesty."

Ben rolled his eyes at the title as Jay kept his gaze turned towards the wall in a death stare. "I just assumed you were out exploring. It's a trend I'm noticing with Isle kids. You're all very obsessed with the 'go-wherever-I-want' freedom. Mal does the exact same thing." He sighed. "Listen, I notice you're having a hard time adjusting to Auradon. I know I'm not Mal, but I'd like to help out if I can." He put his hands in his bathrobe and Jay turned his fiery stare back towards him.

"I'm fine." Jay snapped. "Auradon is having a hard time adjusting to us. And you're the last person I'd want help from, ever. I don't need a royal who left me to fight for scraps in a city of death where everything is designed to kill you and then proceeded to steal my best friend and make her a figurehead for Auradon-"

"For the Isle," Ben cut off Jay irritably. "Let's just make that clear before she lays it into both of us. She made herself a figurehead from the Isle she wanted to raise up." Ben tried to lay pressure on what Mal's choices had been as much as he could.

"You took her," Jay spat.

Ben sighed. That, unfortunately, he couldn't deny. It would go down to be lost in history that the palace had taken Mal from her home and turned her into their queen. "Yeah, I'm sorry," Ben apologized. "It didn't occur to my parents that she'd have a life on the Isle that she wouldn't be
prepared to leave. We genuinely thought she'd been scheming since she was small and that her mother would have told her all the curse details. We weren't expecting a teenager. someone so young, who had no idea what was going on. But... shouldn't you be blaming Maleficent for making the curse or my parents for making the Isle? It's not my fault. Everything happened before I was even born."

Jay opened his mouth, but the door opened before he could say anything. Doug appeared, rubbing a sore spot on his arm. He brushed past Jay and leaned down to examine the computer's external components and ports. "You're lucky I'm still here, Ben," Doug sighed by way of greeting. "I was working on your wifi system."

"Thanks for your help, Doug," Ben sighed in relief. "What's wrong with the wifi?"

"Too many guests," Doug grumbled. "I'm hoping to get home before midnight, so let's hurry."

Ben blinked in surprise. "It's past two a.m.," he informed Doug. Doug turned and stared at him, then let out a groan.

"Why are you up?" Doug asked as the computer screen lit up and began to hum.

"Incoming call from the Isle," Ben yawned. "The palace attendants woke me up to receive the call for Mal."

"She needs to hurry back," Doug hummed. "I hope you know her password."

"I don't," Ben groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. He had no idea what it could be either - he and Mal didn't share passwords at all. He had no past knowledge to guess at what it could be. "Want to bet ten dollars I can guess it within the hour?"

"Try 'Maleficent10," Doug recommended with a snort. "That was it before I told her to change it. Do you have her phone password?"

"I don't," Ben shook his head. "Her phone falls under the category of 'her space', and I don't interfere with her things. But I bet that her password has something to do with the Isle..." He trailed off, and then glanced at Jay to see if the other man would have any recommendations. Jay kept his arms crossed and a mask of calm across his face, but his eyes betrayed that he was as stumped as Ben and Doug were. Ben squinted at the notes on Mal's desk and then snorted. "Actually, hold on."

He pulled a post-it note off of the edge of Mal's screen. "According to this, it's 'bellesdaughterinlaw'. No embellishments or anything."

"Sounds like her," Doug scoffed. "Someone needs to teach that girl how to pick better passwords."

"I'm not going to say anything to her about it," Ben warned his old friend. "Keep in mind she was raised in an open information society and she doesn't really care for much security." The computer screen flickered and then the password screen appeared. Doug slid a keyboard out of a hidden drawer in the desk. A smile crossed Ben's face when he glimpsed the shiny spots on her keyboard where she'd rest her wrists as she typed. Doug chuckled.

"She prefers the keyboard over the touchscreen stuff," Doug commented and withdrew as Ben leaned forward and punched the code in. Jay came over to supervise as Ben hit enter. Doug raised an eyebrow at him. "So, you're Jafar's son?"

Jay crossed his arms and flexed his muscles. "Yes," He admitted.

"Cool," Doug nodded and rubbed his sore hands. "So, quick question, the blue-haired girl in your
group, what's her name?" Ben glanced over at Doug with a raised eyebrow. He had no idea when Doug could have possibly crossed paths with Evie, but he hoped his friend knew what he was getting into.

"What's it to you?" Jay demanded. Ben felt warning bells go off in his head and decided it was a good time to intervene.

"Her name is Evie," Ben interrupted before Jay or Doug could grow defensive. "Daughter of the Evil Queen. She's like Mal, except she likes fashion and makeup instead of swords and heights." He gestured to the screen. "Where's her communicator?" He asked.

Doug sighed and leaned down to navigate through Mal's apps. "So... is she enough like Mal that she'd deck me if I tried to say 'hi'?" He asked.

"No," Ben shook his head. "Probably not. But... don't mention Mal to her. Evie is devastated Mal wants to stay. I don't think she's as... fiery as Mal was since she avoids me instead of trying to engage me, but Mal still wants her to chill about her place in the palace. We were talking last night, and she's just exhausted with how Evie wants her to leave." Jay shifted his weight like he wanted to ask what Mal had been saying about him.

Doug straightened up with the communicator system live on the computer. A pulsing icon was indicating an awaiting call. "Mal usually takes her calls through an earpiece. She likes to have the one in while she blows out the other with music. It should be in the first drawer there. Do you want it?"

Ben instinctively began to reach for the drawer handle, then paused. Jay would demand to hear everything afterward, so... he swallowed. "No, that's fine, Doug," he decided, forcing his hands to settle and still on the top of the desk. "Thank you for all your help. The palace just wouldn't run without you."

"No, it wouldn't," Doug yawned. "Okay, can you handle powering it off, or do you need me to stick around?"

"I can handle it," Ben assured him, clapping his friend on the shoulder lightly. "Go home and get some rest. Or feel free to crash here... either way."

Doug yawned. "I might try and go home... maybe."

"Feel free to join us for breakfast tomorrow if you decide to stay here," Ben invited.

"I will," Doug yawned and turned to leave the room. He opened the door mid-wave to Ben and paused. A guard appeared, looking around the inside of the office. Doug stumbled back as the guard examined the scene - who was inside, where they were, everything. Ben held up a finger and raised his eyebrows, and the guard nodded in understanding and stepped back into the hallway, out of sight. Doug followed without a word and the door shut behind them.

Ben found Mal's mouse and tapped the pulsing icon on the screen. A crackle of static and sound echoed through the speakers behind Mal's screen. "Yes, I know," a voice snapped on the other end. "I'm trying to get a hold of the palace, but it's not like King Benjamin can be awake all hours of the day."

"Hello?" Ben asked. "Is anyone there? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, a relieved voice confirmed through the phone. "Is this King Benjamin?"
"Ben," Ben replied. "Is this Eliza Deavor?" It'd better be, because Eliza was the only one Mal had given permission to page the palace, and unless Eliza was dead or incarcerated, he would be angry at anyone else waking him up before daylight hours.

"Yes, this is - I am Eliza," Eliza let out a second relieved breath.

"What's the problem?" Ben asked, reaching for a pen and flipping a file over.

Eliza took a deep breath. "There's been a murder," She informed him. An icy feeling coated Ben's spine. "An Isle political statement. One of the citizens was captured by Isle rebels outside the barrier. Her body is hanging in one of the trees on the rotten part of the Isle, where we can all see it but can't reach it. The murderers are hiding outside the entrance gate, waiting for someone to either leave or try to come back into the city. Myth, Mercy, and May, along with the rest of the magical citizens of the Isle can't use their magic in the sealed barrier. We still have citizens outside. How should we see them to safety?"

Ben's hand stilled as he processed all that he had been told. It was clear the Isle needed an immediate response, meaning he'd have to borrow Mal's shoes to try and fill her footsteps for a little while. His throat pinched. After only two seconds of silence, Jay leaped into action at his side, elbowing Ben aside a little as he leaned towards the computer in a small panic. "Get a task force together to lead them to safety!" He demanded in a shout.

"No!" Ben protested immediately. "No, we can't do that." He pressed his fingertips to his brow line and used an arm to guide Jay away from the computer by a few inches.

"Of course we can!" Jay exclaimed. "We have plenty of strong people in the city!"

"I don't want more casualties!" Ben snapped back firmly. "If we send them out, it'll be like killing fish in a barrel. We can't fight back."

Jay's face turned red and the veins in his neck and arms began to throb. "People have died and will die if we don't do something!" Jay yelled.

"I know that," Ben reminded Jay crossly. He just needed a minute to think... what would keep the most people safe until Mal got back?

"No, you don't know anything!" Jay exploded. "You royals, you have no idea how ruthless and cruel the Isle of the Lost can be!"

"Jay!" Ben yelled. "This has nothing to do with me and everything to do with Mal and the Isle. It's about protecting the people there." He put a hand down on Mal's desk as if he was cupping her hand under his and turned to the computer. Eliza hadn't been able to see the dispute, only to hear it. "Eliza," He began and exhaled. "You're better qualified to guide the Isle than I am. Until Mal gets an official second-in-command, you're her senior citizen. But speaking as Mal's husband, we cannot organize an attack without the Queen's approval. We don't want to pointlessly lose citizens to the people outside." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "As for the people outside, we're already planning to invade the Isle of the Lost to free people the villains have been holding captive. Mal will probably accelerate those plans. Hopefully, they'll have the sense to hide themselves, but if they try to come to the entrance, do your best to protect their entry back inside. I wouldn't leave the barrier, though. I'll get in touch with Mal and we will, for sure, hammer out something that will hopefully keep everyone safe, I'll try and call tomorrow, or later today, really, with details from the queen. For now, don't attack and try to keep panic at a low."

"I agree with all of that." Eliza hummed. "We, uh, can't do anything about the body yet, though."
"Can you hide it from view?" Ben asked with a wince. "Have some magical citizens spell something up?"

"Maybe," Eliza exhaled. "I'll get back to you. Sorry for the late call and the bad news."

"Thank you for calling," Ben nodded. "I'm sorry I don't have any easy answers."

Eliza hummed. "You're a good man and a good king. We're happy you're on hand and grateful Mal married someone sensible, who cares about the Isle."

Ben chuckled softly. "Thank you, Eliza. I'll try and get back to you as quickly as I can," Ben reached for the mouse and then ended the call. He set about shutting down the computer as Jay frowned. Ben waited with trepidation for the man to explode and wondered if now was the time to call the guard inside.

"You're not doing enough!" Jay exploded after several seconds of silence. "I thought you were supposed to be taking care of Mal's kingdom?"

"That was never Mal's orders," Ben disagreed. "The only reason I gave Eliza any suggestions at all is that it was an emergency. You heard Mal. I'm supposed to be sticking to my kingdom."

"You're letting Mal's people die!" Jay snapped, hands balling up into fists as Ben finished shutting down the computer and straightened up.

"I'm protecting her people," Ben explained in a slow, soothing tone. "And the citizens were warned about the rotten part of the Isle not being safe."

"The Isle has never been safe, but of course you wouldn't know! You privileged, spoiled royals have spent your entire lives basking in comfort and riches while Isle folk like Evie and Carlos and Jay and your wife were starving to death in clouds of smog!" Jay slammed his hands down on the desk and there was a loud cracking sound, though Ben couldn't see any immediate damage. He straightened up, gaze growing hard, and shoved his hands into his pockets so Jay couldn't see how tightly they were clenched.

"This is Mal's desk," he reminded Jay in an authoritative tone. "This is her office we are in and her stuff and her kingdom we are discussing. I get that you're mad and that you want to protect the Isle. I know Auradon has a lot to answer for. But I am not going to go behind Mal's back and organize a militia that will turn into an inevitable massacre. We need to wait for her instructions. You're always accusing me of manipulation and using her reputation to better myself, so you can't go commanding things behind her back just because she's gone."

Jay let a fist fly. Ben could hear his head snap back in a thunderous crack that seemed to reverberate in the pain blooming across his face. He felt himself stumbling back into the wall. Ben pressed a hand to his mouth where Jay's knuckles had collided and his fingertips came away red. His ears were ringing. He looked back to Jay upon finishing this little self-assessment. 'Mal is going to be furious,' he realized. Beside the desk, he could see Jay coming to the same conclusion. Punching the King of the entire nation and drawing blood from his best friend's husband was taking it a few steps/strides/leaps too far.

"Ben," Jay gasped. "Your face..."

Ben stopped Jay with a hand. His mouth and nose were both bleeding. He found a box of tissues and started trying to stall the blood, all the while feeling his teeth to make sure Jay hadn't knocked any out. He crossed the room to the door and opened it. The guard outside straightened and his
mouth fell open as he took in the state of the king.

Ben turned to Jay. "It's late. We'll speak tomorrow after I've spoken to Mal." Then, to the guard, he asked: "Will you please take Jay back to his room? He doesn't have to stay there, but I'd like him to keep away from the offices and from the Royal Family's rooms. I'm good to escort myself."

Jay looked a bit sick at Ben's words, but he didn't protest the guard as Ben took another wad of tissues and exhaled. The two disappeared and Ben shut his eyes, already dreading the inevitable conversation he'd have to have with Mal.

"You'd better have a good reason for calling before daylight hours," Mal grumbled, rubbing her eyes as she sat down. The fairies who had woken her and summoned her twittered excitedly. Ben wasn't sure what the moorland creatures thought of him, but the ones who usually greeted him seemed to be fans of Mal's husband.

Ben was sitting on a chair in the bathroom and peering down into the basin as he held an ice pack to his lip. Jay's punch had split his upper lip and possibly moved his teeth back, but his nose and jaw weren't broken, so he considered it a stroke of luck on his part. Even so, scary red and dark blue bruises were starting to form. He sighed, knowing it was inevitable that she'd ask what had happened. "Depending on how you react, I might have two good reasons." He replied.

Mal took a good look at him and her mouth fell open. "What happened to your face?" She demanded, bracing her hands against the ground and leaning towards the water on her side.

Ben winced. "Jay," he explained. "He wanted to set up an Isle militia and I... might have put my foot down a bit too hard." Ben swallowed. "I told him he couldn't accuse me of manipulation only to turn around and go behind your back while you're gone."

Mal's eyes lit up and her face turned red. Ben thought he saw shadows going across her hair, and then he realized her horns were materializing out of sheer rage. "Jay was going to set up a militia?" She demanded. "In my country!"

"I told him no," Ben assured her. "And really, the punch isn't as bad as it looks. I'll get my teeth checked out tomorrow, and the bruises should be gone after a few days."

"Punch?" Mal hissed, curling her hands up.

Ben winced and closed his eyes, making the decision to change the subject. The more he said, the more Mal would take out of poor Jay's hide. "We got a bad call from the Isle tonight. Rebels are hiding outside the gate to attack people coming in and going out. Someone was murdered and strung up in the trees to scare everyone. They're calling it a-"

"A statement?" Mal interrupted with wide, surprised eyes.

Ben nodded with a sigh. "You still have citizens who are now trapped outside your safety barrier. What do you want us to do?"

Mal's angered expression had completely fallen away. She trailed her fingers through her hair and twisted a small lock of hair that she almost looked like she was about to bite before she exhaled. "I guess this is it for my plans to open the Isle to Auradon in two weeks." She sighed.

An idea came to Ben. He blinked. "I could send the army for the day," He offered. "Leave them under your direction for the day and with their help and your magic, you can put down your rebellion without, hopefully, any casualties. We can still keep the plans for your massive project so
long as I get your word no one will be hurt under your direction. And if Auradon citizens want to join the army ranks to truly 'see the Isle', I'll be okay with that. You can still do it."

Mal's hands dropped. "You'd do that?" She asked. "Auradon would be furious if you let me lead some of your soldiers for a day."

"Then I'll go over," Ben decided. "And I'll help you in securing the Isle. We'll show Auradon how well we work together and we'll show the Isle that I really do support you and I'll willing to let you lead." A smile spread across Mal's mouth. She nodded and mouthed the words 'that works'. Then, she exhaled.

"As for the current situation... what did you tell Eliza?" She asked, lifting her hands to twist them through her hair.

"Well, first I made it clear I was giving suggestions, not commands," Ben began, shifting the ice on his nose. "And I asked her to keep the peace and quell the panic."

The smile returned to Mal's face and she nodded along to his words. "Good," she agreed and then sighed. "I'm going to have to leave the moorlands a little early so that I can help make arrangements for everything. Let Eliza know I'll be on the Isle after the 27th." A bright smile spread across Ben's face in spite of the numbing bruises.

"Really?" He asked. "Will the moorlands be okay?"

"That's why I'm not coming home right away," Mal explained with a groan. "It's a mess of politics over here. You're the only popular Auradonian because of our relationship, but not everyone likes you. I'm... struggling to demilitarize the country. Some groups have agreed not to fight, but are making all sorts of magical weaponry and..." she trailed off with a sigh. "Please don't ever do this to my country again, Ben." She begged.

"I'm going to impose restrictions on the barrier," Ben agreed immediately. "We won't go near it without permission, we won't place armed forces anywhere around it without everyone's knowledge, I'm going to pull out all the stops." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Do you want me to go ahead with our plans for your Gold Rush project?"

"Not everything needs to be secretive," Mal sniffed. "You don't need to come up with silly codenames for everything."

Ben shrugged. "It's just how I was raised." He replied. "You like it."

A little color came into Mal's cheeks as she smiled at him. She opened her mouth a little, bit her lip, and then closed it again with a smile. Ben raised an eyebrow. "Is there something you want to say?" He asked.

Mal watched him for several seconds, observing the colors in his eyes, and then began to fumble her words a little. "I - there's been something on my mind. But I don't think it's the right time for me to talk with you about it. Maybe later."

Ben nodded and closed his eyes, pressing the ice to his lip carefully. "Well, I'd better get back into bed then, and you'd better get back to your rest too." Mal nodded with a sudden yawn and stretched her arms up above her head. Ben watched her move with a soft smile. "I love you," He told her.

A bright, happy light came into Mal's eyes. "And I love you," She reminded him. Then, a dark shadow crossed her expression. "You let Jay know I'm going to have words with him, alright?"
Ben sighed, knowing it was inevitable, and nodded. "Goodnight," He bid, and then the connection shut off. Ben returned to bed, almost two hours after first being awoken.

Ben's parents didn't say anything about the dark colors spreading across Ben's nose, but Evie and Carlos had a very urgently-whispered conversation about how freaking mad Mal was going to be. Ben didn't comment much on it - all he did was say "Mal and I had a conversation about the Isle and everything last night. She's coming home early."

Everyone was correct in assuming she was pissed.

Mal hadn't let Ben know when exactly she'd be home, only when Eliza should expect her, so as the days ticked down to the 27th, everyone became a bit antsy - especially Jay. Jay and Ben didn't speak again and barely interacted with each other, and Ben figured that was for the best until Mal returned.

Everyone was gathered in the dining room together on the twenty-fifth, two days before Mal was officially due back, for dinner when Ben wandered in late with a stack of papers under his arm. Belle and Adam exchanged glances at the workload as he set it on the table and pulled out his chair.

"Work at the table?" Adam asked, raising an eyebrow and threading his fingers together.

"I'm not going to touch it until I get up to my room," Ben sighed, reaching for a roll and beginning to serve himself.

"Busy day?" Carlos asked.

Ben nodded. "Lots of trade problems between Arendelle and Weselton again, Cinderellasburg wants Mal and I to journey down there for some sort of official apology from the royal family and My ex-girlfriend still isn't letting herself move on, meaning I had to carve out an hour to write a strongly-worded email to her grandmother." Ben exhaled with a roll of his eyes. There were other things, of course, but they were things he wasn't supposed to be discussing with them. "I, uh, got an update from the Isle of the Lost."

Evie, Jay, and Carlos exchanged glances and Evie took up the role of speaking. "What's going on?" She asked.

"The body was removed from the trees," Ben began, pouring himself a glass of water and closing his eyes as he thought. "Someone was able to sneak over the wall with some rope."

"A rebel?" Carlos asked, furrowing his brow.

Ben shook his head. "No, they can't come within a certain distance of the wall. It was someone with a card. But they managed to scale the entire thing from a far side and drop in the long way. It's great that they were able to get in, but Eliza is thinking Mal will be upset if people start climbing those walls that she paid to have built." He tilted his head to the side and started skimming the top of a document as he ate.

Evie and Carlos nodded along to his words, and Jay pushed his plate away without a word. Behind Ben, the door opened and a black-haired woman appeared. "Evening, Sophia," Belle smiled and waved.

"Hello!" Sophia smiled and dipped her head towards the former queen. She came to stand behind Ben and held up what looked like a shirt with a circle pulling part of it taunt around the neckline.
"Evie, I was wondering if you could teach me that trick you told me on the Isle. With the beads?"

"Oh, yeah," Evie nodded and a little smile spread across her face. "I'd be happy to. Can I finish dinner first?"

"Oh, of course!" Sophia held her hands up. "And actually, I have some beads up in my room that you could use to do the same thing on one of your outfits. I even know an apple blossom stitch."

Evie's eyes lit up in excitement. "That sounds wonderful!" She exclaimed.

"I'll go grab them!" Sophia declared, turning and heading back towards the door. She opened the door, paused, and then stepped aside with a smile and a finger pressed to her lips. Mal appeared, stepping around the door and glancing around. The tips of her horns were peeking out from underneath her hair and her eyes and skin were glowing. Mal waved, spotted Ben, immersed in his paper, and smiled. Everyone watched her tip-toe forward, her combat boots making little thuds against the flooring, and then lean down to put two fingers underneath Ben's chin, dragging his head away from his paper and up to make eye contact with her. Ben blinked a little, focused, and let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank god you're here!" He exclaimed. Mal barely had time to laugh before he had leaned up to kiss her, cutting off whatever sarcastic retort she'd been about to procure. Mal put her hands up by his eyes as a smile spread across her mouth. Jay curled his hands into fists and kept his gaze on the ground as she withdrew, laughing.

"You kiss me like that, and people will start to think you actually missed me." Mal chuckled, putting a knee on Ben's leg for balance before stabilizing herself.

"I did miss you," Ben mourned. "But you don't care, do you? I don't know if you'll ever come back, but you always know where you'll find me, huh?"

"I missed you too," Mal promised with a smile. She drew her hands down his cheeks, away from his hair, and then used her thumb to brush over Ben's nose. Most of the bruising had faded into malformed yellow marks, but the bits around the bridge of his nose were blue still. Ben winced as her touch ghosted across the damaged area and Mal made a little sound of sympathy as an ugly scowl knit itself across her face. She turned and cast a death stare at Jay, who flinched, sank a little into his seat, and refused to meet her eyes.

"Don't lay into him, Mal." Ben sighed. "You just got back."

"I did just get back, and I just barely saw the damage," Mal agreed. "Your point is?"

"I missed you too," Mal promised with a smile. She drew her hands down his cheeks, away from his hair, and then used her thumb to brush over Ben's nose. Most of the bruising had faded into malformed yellow marks, but the bits around the bridge of his nose were blue still. Ben winced as her touch ghosted across the damaged area and Mal made a little sound of sympathy as an ugly scowl knit itself across her face. She turned and cast a death stare at Jay, who flinched, sank a little into his seat, and refused to meet her eyes.

"Don't lay into him, Mal." Ben sighed. "You just got back."

"I did just get back, and I just barely saw the damage," Mal agreed. "Your point is?"

"It's almost gone." Ben frowned. "Just let it go."

"Let it go like he let his fist slip after he gave my assistant orders without my permission?" Mal demanded in a hiss. Her hair was rising to stand on end and her eyes were giving off an unmistakable, lazer-like glow. "The word for that is insubordination, by the way."

"I'm over it," Ben told her firmly. "And I'm the person who was punched. You don't need to fight that battle for me."

Mal sneered. "Well, fine, I'll just remain angry he messed up my favorite face. But the Isle is my kingdom and-

"I'm sorry," Jay interrupted, putting his elbows on the table and ducking his shoulders. "I know... this isn't the Isle of the Lost. Believe me, I know it. It's just going to take some time. I'm used to
jumping up in your defense and being your second-in-command, and it's weird now that you've got... him."

"Say his name," Mal demanded, squinting at Jay. Her horns grew a bit larger atop his head. "Look me in the eyes and say it."

Jay's jaw grew tight and he had to clearly force himself to look up and make eye contact with the magical queen of the moors. "Ben," he gritted out. "It's hard letting go of old habits and realizing Ben is your second-in-command now." He splayed his hands on the table and let his eyes squeeze shut.

The light mostly went out in Mal's eyes and she nodded, accepting the apology. Her horns withdrew a little as she pulled out her chair and took a seat beside Ben.

"How's Auradon?" She asked, reaching for food with a clear expression.

Ben thumbed through his stack of papers, withdrew a lined paper, and handed it to her. Mal started reading, and her hand fell slack against the table. She turned to stare at Ben. "Is that for real?" She asked. Ben nodded without a word. A little smile spread across her face. "You're really going to-" and then she stopped as Ben held up a hand. He glanced to his parents carefully.

"Going to...?" Carlos asked, trailing off.

Mal focused her gaze on her plate as a broad smile stretched across her lips. She didn't say anything as she handed the paper back to Ben. "Carlos, I have an assignment for you for the Isle of the Lost. Are you interested?"

Carlos's eyebrows shot up as he exchanged a look with Evie. Jay's gaze was still trained on the table. "Sure?" He asked, slowly. "What was with the paper?"

Mal waved him off. "Nothing," she declared with a bright smile. But her smile was bright as she took Ben's hand and squeezed it tightly.

It was August second.

Sun beat down from above. Mal was surprised the sun hadn't melted the sand of the beach into glass. Utopian children were lounging in the waves with sunburned skin as two ships ferried people from Auradon over the to Isle on a mass service project she guessed would go down in history. Ben was on one of them, and he was bringing almost one hundred Auradonian citizens over. The official Auradon Guard had arrived late the previous night and now stood behind her, waiting on their king.

Mal didn't feel like a queen as she stood with a ripped leather vest in the sun. She felt more like a warrior. Ben's sword was strapped to her waist. Her hair was long again and sun-bleached a brighter purple. She had a feeling it'd go dark again in the winter. For some reason, the people revered her when she walked past. She didn't see why. She was only seventeen, and she was guess-working most of this queen-business.

It took a while for the ships to dock. Once the gangplanks were lowered, people became to stream onshore. Mal had never seen a more mixed group in her life. Most were children of heroes, but some came from ordinary backgrounds. She had to admit, she had been doubtful many would show up to assist the people they'd thrown onto here, especially after hearing the stories of violence, but many people had shown up eager to assist. They came in groups of friends, mostly empty-handed, but determined.
"Hey." Someone said behind her. She barely had time to turn around before Ben scooped her up. She shrieked and laughed a little as he spun her around and then set her down carefully.

"Hi!" She greeted him. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Truly." He agreed, taking her hand. "Are you ready to liberate your first nation?"

"Third." She corrected. "The moors, and all the people inside the city. Now the rest of the Isle." She looked out over to the border of the Villainous Isle. "This is really, really cool. Auradon has never done anything like this for us before."

"Well, it's time we started to change that." Ben laughed, raising her knuckles to his lips in a silly flourish. The bruises from two weeks ago had faded almost completely, and now he was looking back to his old self.

Mal hummed in agreement and looked around. "Today is a great day to be bad." She told him. "We're not lost anymore, we don't have to steal to live... everything is great." She flashed a bright, beautiful white smile at Ben. "Should we let my islanders fight with or without magic?" She asked him.

"Without," Ben recommended. "You're pretty powerful, but so is your mom. I'd be willing to bet your mom can't sword fight as well as she can spell. Besides, we have no idea what sort of capabilities the villain kids who haven't come over will have. Do you know of anyone in particular who is missing?"

"One of the sons of Gaston, Gil," Mal said automatically. "In fact, all of the pirate crew. Uma, Ursula's kid, Harry, all their gang. Facilier's kid, lots actually." She sighed. "Okay, you're right." She stepped up a few feet in the sand and muttered: "Make me heard really well, make it loud without a yell." Then she opened her mouth and yelled: "Your attention please!" Her voice echoed along the beach and everyone stopped talking.

Mal surveyed the group. She spotted Lonnie, who was already holding a sword and leaning on it. Evie, Jay, and Carlos were making their way to the front of the crowd, dressed in their old Isle clothes. Mal hesitated when she saw Audrey in white shorts and a pink tank-top but said nothing. She assumed Ben had already met her. Luckily, she couldn't seem to spot Ben's other old friend, Chad, anywhere.

"Lost boys, lost girls!" Mal proclaimed, "Today's the day you won't forget! Everyone, come and take your shot. You all know you're the best." She paused to brush her hair out of her face and spread her arms. "You know, they told us that being from the Isle was bad - whose glad to be bad?" She yelled. Isle citizens thrust their arms into the skin and yelled in support. because really, now, it was great to have a safe city and guaranteed protection.

"We're going to divide up into groups!" Mal announced. "We have swords, we have stun guns, and we have people who are going to stay behind to explore the safe part of the Isle. Ben already gave you the rundown on the mainland, so let's set straight to work. I want a group of swords people with me. We're going to go in and try to push back any of their resistance. I'm one of two people who can use magic inside the barrier, and the other is not present. Now, unless someone has been keeping secrets, there should be no guns on the Isle. I know for a fact that the villains will possess many types of improvised weapons. If you're not comfortable with a sword but still want to go in, we're going to give you a tranquilizer gun for anyone who comes at you. You'll go in second and while the first group tries to flush out the prisoners, you will be responsible for subduing the villains and making clear the way back to the city. If you don't feel comfortable going in at all, you'll stay here to receive the people coming in; especially if you are medically trained at all."
People exchanged looks, and a couple of people began to separate, then paused. No one knew where to go.

Mal folded her arms. "I'm going to head the fighting group with Carlos. Jay and Evie are going to do group two. Hopefully, this won't take more than three hours and we can all go home unless you want to stick around for the rest of the day and look around." A couple of people laughed.

Mal walked over to a large collection of swords. When people had first started coming to the city, they'd brought all their weapons with them. When she'd asked if anyone could donate for the day, this had happened. Now there was a large quantity of close-range melee-type weapons. She picked up a sword and showed it off. "If you're with group one, one of these or any of the weapons that were brought with the ships will do. If you're with group two, tranquilizer guns will be handed out as you walk out of the city. If you're staying behind, you're teaming up with the Islanders to do everything you can to keep these people alive. Use my weapons incorrectly and I'll send you home at the mercy of my husband."

People split. An especially large number went to group two, with only about twenty people coming to one. Islanders were also moving in to join ranks. Mal watched Audrey take a few steps towards Ben and put a hand on his shoulder. They began to talk as everyone around them walked to join a group.

Later, Mal wasn't sure what drove her to action. It wasn't in spite or jealousy. She'd come to a general calmness in her heart about Audrey. The situation had been unfair to everyone, and Ben's old girlfriend was no exception. However, Audrey would only continue embittering herself if Mal let this continue. So maybe, in hindsight, Mal had done what she had in a glimpse of what could happen - what Audrey could do.

"Audrey!" Mal called in a short tone. "You should come with me."

Audrey looked over at Mal with her mouth half-open as she stared in surprise. "What?" She asked dumbly.

"You should come with me," Mal repeated. "I'll need your help. If you're not comfortable with it after a while, you can come back." She tossed Audrey the sword she'd been wielding and bent to pick up a new one. Audrey yelped and let out a very unladylike word as she fumbled to grab the sword from mid-air. Mal smirked as Audrey blushed.

Behind Audrey, Ben was giving both girls an impressed smirk. Mal winked at him, and he rolled his eyes. Meanwhile, Audrey was starting to turn colors as she stared at the long blade in her hands. Before she could drop it, Mal told her: "Keep up the language and you just might steal Ben from me, Audrey." Both Audrey and Ben looked surprised at her words. Mal continued: "Ben's got a weird thing for bad girls."

Ben's entire face and ears went red as Mal gave him a devilish smirk. "I do not!" Ben protested as people around them began to giggle and laugh. Mal wagged her fingers at him. Audrey looked hard at Ben's red face and then her gaze flickered between the sword and her former boyfriend. Her face turned stony before she hefted that sword over her shoulder and stalked away to join team one without a second glance towards Ben.

"Now you've made it personal," Ben warned, coming towards her. "She's gotta prove she's badder than you, and good enough for me in her mind now."

"Badder than me? Does such a thing exist?" Mal asked. They chuckled, though Ben still looked worried. He pulled her towards him. Mal put her hands up around his neck, but he simply grabbed
his sword out of her sheath. The blade flashed in the light as he examined it with a little smile.

"This is staying behind," He told her. "I don't want you losing it."

Mal frowned. "Please?" She begged, but Ben shook his head and handed her one from the pile. She sighed. "Fine."

Ben snorted. "We need to just get you one of your own," He remarked, and then put an arm around her shoulders. "So, are we doing this together?"

Mal chewed on her lip. "Actually... I need you to lead the groups behind me," She sighed. "And, please don't hate me for this, but I need someone to give orders to, well, Jay. He just works better as a follower."

Ben deadpanned at her. "I wanted to go with you, he complained. "You're going to make me go with the guy who punched me for not setting up an Isle army so we can do the thing we're doing now?"

"Look, I'm not doubting your abilities with a sword, but I actually need you to be with them. Can I count on you there to help me?" Mal stuck out her lip the slightest fraction and Ben deflated. "Yeah." He sighed. "But I'll still miss you."

"I know." Mal got on her tiptoes and put her arms around his neck. "But... do this for me and I'll... make it up to you." She rested a finger on his collarbone and Ben watched her trace the outline of the bone.

Ben raised an eyebrow. "You sound either doubtful of your ability to do that or overly-confident in your pre-prepared plans."

Mal cocked her head shyly. "I... might have thought you and I should... spend some quality alone time with each other." She met his eyes. "You know?"

Ben tilted his head and a tight, disbelieving frown spread across his cheeks. "I get the feeling you're not talking about Auradon Hero Movies."

Mal unwrapped her arms a little to play with the collar of his faux-Isle Jacket that Evie had made for him on Mal's request. "Not exactly." She sighed, with a little pink blush blooming across her cheeks like a tiny azalea.

"Don't let me jump to conclusions." Ben raised a lazy eye at her and then raised a hand to brush a thumb down her cheek.

"Well, we've been married about a year. It's about time we officiated that." Mal met his blue gaze without a single blink.

"I don't know. Are you sure you want to? It's not exactly something you can take back." Ben whispered, well aware people were still slipping around them.

"You're my best friend," Mal told him. "And I love you so, so much." The corners of her mouth crinkled as Ben brushed his fingertips on her hairline.

"You're still seventeen." Ben pointed out, brow knitting together a little. "We - I - can wait. We don't have to rush. I want you, but I want you to have that time to grow up and be sure before that time comes for us." He kissed her forehead. "Let's talk later. I'm going to go with my group now, okay?"
"Kay," Mal said. She kissed his cheek. "Bye babe." She whispered. Ben laughed with red appearing in his cheeks as they stepped apart. He slipped away. Mal hefted her sword and began to head towards Carlos to direct group one.

Over in group two, Evie was hustling around. She was trying to organize the group enough to direct them. It wasn't easy when her talents lay more in allure rather than blunt force like Mal's.

As she opened her mouth, someone coughed behind her. "Uhm, excuse me." Someone tapped her shoulder.

She turned around and saw a man with sandy blonde hair and glasses. He coughed upon seeing her and swallowed as he blushed. "Sorry to bug you, miss." He said in a higher octave. "I'm not sure where I should go. I'm not entirely sure…"

"Do you have good aim?" Evie interrupted him.

He faltered. "Uhm, no." He admitted.

Evie nodded. "Okay then, sir… what's your name?"

"Doug!" Doug said quickly.

"Well, Doug," Evie said. "You should go into group three and help those who come back."

Doug nodded. "Uh, thanks, miss…?"

"Evie." Evie supplied. She gave Doug a quick smile. "Nice to meet you, Doug." She told him as she turned back to the crowd. "Listen up!" She yelled. No one paid her attention. She saw Jay standing on a soapbox a little ways away and began to head his way. He held out a hand to help her up and then cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Attention!" Jay bellowed. "If you're over here, you should be group two. Now pay attention to Evie, because she's going to give you a crash course in Isle culture. It is beyond important that you're aware of how to blend in because we are going to break up into smaller groups the farther in we go in. Sorry, but it's just not feasible to stick together when there's forty of us and a hundred of them. Mal's group will go ahead and will hold the villains back, but as a last resort, you should try to blend in. So, shut up and pay attention!"

Evie stood up straight and set a delicate hand on her waist. "Now I know you think that you could never be like us, but everybody's got a wicked side. If you want to get it right, you need to watch and learn. We're going to teach you how to not care and how to disappear because you'll draw attention if you act like this. You've got to be wrong to get it right around here!"

The crowd murmured in consent, and Evie tried to relish in the feeling of everyone staring at her as she explained how to mold your reactions to fit in with the villains. And suddenly… all of it felt fake. Evie could scarcely explain it, but it was almost as if the sky had parted and shone a new light, and she felt rather like a child's toy now than a real person.

Fake. She was fake. None of this felt real.
I do not own Disney's Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, 101 Dalmanations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, The Incredibles 2, The Little Mermaid, Mulan, Cinderella, the Princess and the Frog, or Dreamworks Rise of the Guardians.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Audrey's Point of View on the Isle of the Lost during the Isle Rush.

Chapter Notes

I do not own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, Mulan, 101 Dalmanations, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Aladdin, Cinderella, Tarzan, The Little Mermaid, Peter Pan, or the Princess and the Frog.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Audrey wasn't quite sure what she was supposed to be feeling.

Her ex-boyfriend's wife who happened to be her mother's enemy's daughter had invited her into her group. Mal had literally tossed her a sword and said she'd need her. Now Audrey had no idea why. It was quite clear as soon as she joined the rest of the group that they were far, far different from her. They were mostly men who had been on various fencing teams and whose dads or uncles or grandfathers had taught them to spar at a young age. There were a couple of girls, like Lonnie, but all things accounted for, they were about seventy-percent men.

There was black upper-body armor for their use, though Audrey wasn't quite sure where they'd gotten it. It was placed alongside the walls of the utopia for everyone who would be entering the outside. The soldiers already had theirs strapped to their bodies.

It hadn't exactly occurred to Audrey that she might be doing dangerous things when she'd come. Truth-be-told, she'd heard Ben would be there and thought it'd be a great chance to hook up with her old boyfriend. Unfortunately, he and Mal seemed to be getting closer, and Audrey was beginning to wonder if maybe this wasn't just a bad-girl-infatuation after all. What were the chances that Ben might actually be in love with Mal, a villainess?

Audrey stood in line with everyone else, holding a sword in her hand that felt - oddly - one with her arm, even though she'd never held a sword before. She carefully observed her comrades and mirrored the way they held their weapons as they stood in unorganized ranks, awaiting the Queen of the Isle.

Mal had dressed for the occasion. She had on a sleeveless leather jacket made of a variety of purple and green shades, zippers, and other metal appliques. Attachable sleeves were currently stuffed into Mal's pockets at the shoulders. Long pants with the hems covered by her combat boots protected her legs from the sun. Her hair was down, and Audrey could see that the back of her neck was wet with sweat. Still, the area was protected from the sun. A large part of Audrey thought: 'How could Ben allow someone so closely associated with him to dress in such a fashion?' The other part of her felt silly and preppy. She pulled the armor on, which would cover her chest, back, and arms, and picked at her shorts where she'd cut off her jeans with intentions to show off as much as possible. Now, she wished she'd kept them longer so that she could pretend that fabric
would protect her.

"Alright." Mal snapped to attention. Audrey looked up instinctively. A tall woman with grey hair had approached Mal and held out a large tablet. Mal took it with a smile. She turned it around to show the twenty-ish people who had chosen to join ranks in group one. On the screen was a map of the Isle. Mal pointed to a point on a pier closely surrounded by water. "These are the piers." She explained. "I know for a fact people are gathered there, but Isle rebels could be scattered all over the place, all on the villain's team." Mal pointed as she spoke. "People who waited to see if they wanted to come into the Utopia were taken captive by Maleficent and are now being held hostage. They're either subdued, held captive, or too ill to move. My goal is to bring everyone in unless they specifically tell you otherwise or try to hurt you. So, here's how this will work." Mal handed the tablet back and dug her sword into the ground in front of her.

Audrey tuned out most of what Mal was saying. Mostly, she was giving out tips for moving stealthily and keeping quiet. She carefully moved her sword from hand to hand as she evaluated Mal's stance and composure. Everything about Ben's wife was guarded, from the straight-mouthed expression frozen on her face to the way the muscles in her arms moved in the sunlight. Audrey was trying to figure out what seemed so ethereal and unreal about her until she realized that the small hairs on her arms were purple with the rest of her head. When she stood in the sunlight, she looked like she was glowing a slightly different shade.

Audrey looked down at her own arms. Small brown hairs were scattered amidst freckles, and her arms looked much less muscular than the Queen's. Probably from climbing the palace over and over. Audrey remembered what she had said almost a year ago: "Stuff like that helps me stay fit."

Climbing the palace walls, and probably running across her mom's forfeited kingdom had kept her in shape. Audrey had to bite down the bile rising in her throat.

How could Ben like her? How could Ben want her? Didn't he see all the awful things she was going to do to the kingdom?

"Alright, let's break!" Mal declared. Her eyes fell on Audrey and Audrey felt ice creep down her spine. "Audrey." Mal raised an arm and waved Audrey towards her. "You're with me."

Audrey looked left, and right, and stayed where she was. Instead, Mal came towards her with her sword slung over her shoulder. "I'll keep you safe." She promised. She turned to others in the group. "Lonnie, watch Carlos's back. Marin, you bring up the tail."

Audrey hadn't noticed before, but Islanders were beginning to mix with their groups. Marin, who was a large, imposing, dark-skinned man with tattoos and an upper ear piercing, moved to the back of the group under Mal's command. Other similar men and women were beginning to mix.

"Let's move!" Mal barked. She pressed a small hand to Audrey's back, in between her shoulder blades, and lead her in front of the group to the entrance of the Isle. Group two was following behind them. Audrey began to panic, but she kept her mouth shut as they moved towards the gates into the city. Mal readied her sword, and they flooded through, out of the city.

The air was disgusting. Audrey smelled things rotting; like the time she'd peeled an orange in her garbage and then not taken it out quick enough, resulting in a rancid smell that had filled her room for an entire day, but much, much worse. The city had been built in the middle of an uninhabited forest, where small, scraggly trees grew among large, towering trunks with knotted, uneven bark. The dirt was mottled black and grey with occasional piles of sawdust from where the builders had left it. As they continued, Audrey saw small, scorched places in the earth where fires had been lit. While the barrier appeared purple from inside the city, it now disappeared behind them, as if it
wasn't there at all. Pollution and clouds had become trapped inside the barrier, resulting in an awful smog that clouded the sky from view entirely. The entire environment was made up of grey, brown, black and dirty blue.

Someone shouted in the trees "it's the queen!" and Mal raised a hand. The tips of her fingers were alight with green magic. There was a snap, and a shadow fell through the twigs and branches about twenty yards away. Audrey yelped as they thudded towards the ground. The other rebels who had been hiding in the bushes squealed and screamed, and footsteps thundered through the woods as people rushed to get away. Mal moved to stop only two more, and then continued marching her small force through the Isle of the Lost.

Her blood felt like ice and fire underneath her skin as she followed Mal onto the Isle. The group spread out and became sparsely thin. The purple-haired fae remained beside her, gently pressing her onward whenever Audrey slowed.

The forest gave way to a ditch with rotting, muddy water inside. Audrey saw defected frogs whose legs were splayed at awful angles, either from cruel Isle kids hurting them or birth defects and mutations caused by the dangerous chemicals Auradon sometimes sent with their trash. One small monster leaped past her foot with mottled purplish-green skin, a multitude of eyes spread across a sagging face, and warts bigger than her fingernails. There were no fish, and no birds flying anywhere.

A single bridge stretched across the ditch. Mal fingered the railing as she began to cross and stopped midway across to peer down through the cracks as if she were looking for anything down below. Audrey followed her and tried to ignore the cold settling into her bones and the imposing creaking of the bridge.

Across the bridge was a small collection of crumbling buildings with many different levels. Most were made of bricks with plywood roofs and tarps covering broken sides. Graffiti ran rampant. Audrey gaped at the intense slang splattered at great heights on the side of the buildings. Many of them appeared to have been done by the same hand, as they were all themed similarly. Audrey flinched when she spotted a mural of Maleficent, Mal's mom. It was beautiful, very intricate, and featured the infamous fae with her hands outstretched and bright green magic in her hands. The inscription 'Long Live Evil' was featured behind the fae woman. underneath the entire painting was the slogan 'There are so many ways to be wicked.'

Ways to be Wicked. Audrey had to scoff to hide the pain in the irony of that statement. Two generations of wicked women ruining her family in two very different ways. One who cursed her kingdom, put her family to sleep, cursed her mom to a nearly-incurable fate, and the other who stole an entire country, her boyfriend, and her future.

Group one began to dissipate into the city. Mal and Audrey held their swords aloft as about four other people crept behind them. She peered behind corners as they walked, and carefully observed all her surroundings as they changed. For Audrey, it was all she could do to tear her eyes off of the buildings, where abandoned and trashed shops lined the alleyways. Audrey stepped over a dirty stuffed dog missing its left arm and leg with a large wooden stake driven through its neck.

As they rounded a corner, Audrey caught a whiff of something horrible. They'd stepped into a small square with uneven cobbbling. Next to her was a shop that read: "Lady Tremaine's Curl Up and Dye" with a large pair of scissors for a logo. Hanging from the scissors was the body of a real dog, swinging back and forth. It was missing all its paws and its snout was tied closed as the poor thing swung back and forth. Mal stared at it for a few seconds.

"Cruella." She said after a few seconds. "Someone strung it up for Cruella. Probably a common
villain trying to get into her graces." Mal shook her head a few times. "It's been a while since I've seen a statement like that." She muttered.

"Should we cut it down?" Someone asked.

"I don't want to waste time." Mal contemplated as she bit her tongue. "And it's probably been a few days since that thing was killed. It probably has maggots and lots of dangerous bugs. We shouldn't touch it without protection."

An Auradon man prodded the dog's side carefully with the hilt of his sword. Its entire side gave way like poking clay with your finger. Audrey gagged. "This is awful!" She hissed.

"Happens all the time, princess." A small boy in an isle vest drawled. He held two swords in his small hands. "People get strung up too." He added.

"This is barbarous!" Audrey protested. She hissed on Mal. "You're going to get us killed!" She accused.

Mal rolled her eyes. "Yes." She agreed sarcastically. "And I with you." She hefted her sword and cut the rope stringing the dog up. The body fell to the ground like a sack of cloth or cotton. Bugs flew up from where they'd nested into the body, and the fur split apart to reveal parts that were held together — not by skin, but by maggots and bacteria. An awful smell washed over them, and Audrey felt her breakfast coming up fast. She gagged again and turned to throw up her stomach.

When she came back up, the same short Isle kid rolled his eyes and said: "Nice," though the other Auradon volunteers also looked a bit green.

"Oh my gosh." Audrey began to shake. She turned to Mal. "I'm not comfortable with this. I want to go back. I want to be with group three. I don't like the Isle." She pleaded

Mal opened her mouth, and from the west came a sizzling sound of electricity, and a strangled yell.

Audrey jumped. Mal closed her mouth. "Tranquilizer gun." She announced to her small group. "Team two must have found a scout." She nodded to Audrey. "Give it a few minutes. If you're still unsure, I'll find someone to take you back."

Mal's eyes suddenly focused on something behind Audrey. "Duck." She commanded and pushed Audrey's shoulders down as the group dropped to the ground. A gunshot echoed off the walls as a bullet ricocheted off Lady Tremaine's wall. Audrey screamed. She was going to die, she was going to die. She'd only come to show Ben how supportive she was of the crown, maybe sway him to at least unblock her on social media, and now she was going to die.

Mal jumped up and brought her sword up to guard herself. Audrey glimpsed the look of intense concentration on her face as she planted her feet, readied her legs, and leaped clear over Audrey's head. She whirled around as Mal rushed towards their assailant. A second bullet whizzed through Mal's hair and hit the building again. The shooter cursed.

The Isle boy behind her jumped up. "Give me a boost." He commanded Audrey and another Auradon man. They quickly got to their feet and grabbed the boys' legs as they carried him into the air. "Over there!" He pointing to Lady Tremaine's sign. The top of the rope was still coiled around one of the scissor's shears. Audrey held her breath as they carried him over the dog and towards the sign. The young man worked quickly as Mal parried their attacker, who had dropped his gun for a steel bar that had been leaning against a building. He loosened the rope around the sign and then looked down at them. "Pull away!" He commanded. Audrey and the Auradonian man quickly obeyed and put him back down a few feet away as Mal pivoted in an alleyway and began to force
their attacker – a thin, bony man with tanned skin clothed in a thin, black, long-sleeved shirt – into the square. He fought valiantly, but Mal was just too quick for him to catch her. It almost reminded Audrey of when Ben had been Captain of the Swords and Sheilds team at Auradon Prep. No one had been able to catch him either.

The boy took the bar and blew it into the side of Mal's head a fraction of a second before she could lean away. It knocked her head back but hadn't caught her at an angle to do much harm - only hitting her cheek and nose a little. Still, she looked immediately offended. With a mighty swing, she knocked the bar out of this hand and quickly kicked him in the chest to send him to the ground.

The Isle boy threw an end of the rope to the man who had helped Audrey lift him, and together they rushed at the man, wrapping the rope around his arms and legs as he shouted and struggled. A small gash was in his cheek from where Mal had hit him, and his rifle was lying abandoned in the alleyway. Someone else in their group carefully walked forward and picked it up. "It's discharged." She announced. "The safety is broken on it."

"The question is where he got a gun," Mal said calmly. "Auradon is usually very careful not to send them over."

"It's not of your business!" The man howled on the ground. "We'll get you, Queen Maleficent!" He tried to spit at Mal but missed entirely.

"Mal." Mal corrected him calmly. "Maleficent is my mom."

"Do I hear a damsel in distress?" Someone chuckled from an alleyway. Audrey jumped and whirled around. King Ben – handsome as ever – was walking out of an opposing alley with a bright smile that somehow managed to make it seem like the sun was coming through. She felt an intense sense of relief to see something so normal and comforting. His collar was folded down and his clothes were clean and even on the Isle, he looked so... kingly. Audrey felt like melting into her shoes. The sword he was holding made him look even more the part of her knight. Behind him was a group of four others, including Mal's friends; the daughter of the Evil Queen and the son of Jafar.

"No distress here," Mal responded with a smirk. "But look, twenty minutes in and we've already caught our first crook." She prodded the screaming man with her shoe. "Care to assist him?" She asked sweetly.

Ben turned green. "No thanks." He said, shaking his head.

Evie rolled her eyes at him and stepped forward. "With pleasure." She purred, leveling her tranquilizer. She pulled the trigger, and bright blue electricity raced out of the barrel. Audrey felt her hairs rise up on end as every nerve ending in her body screamed: "Danger!"

It only lasted a second, and the man didn't even look harmed. Instead, he looked as if he'd suddenly fallen asleep. Evie blew off the tip of the barrel for dramatic effect, even though it wasn't smoking. "If only we'd had these to protect us before you were queen." She mourned. "Think of how we could have ruled the Isle."

All of the villain kids, including Mal, laughed. "Yeah." Mal snorted. "I wouldn't have even become queen. Auradon wouldn't have even been able to pull me off."

Audrey tensed. This was something she'd never heard before. Auradon had pulled Mal off the Island? Why? Perhaps there was truth to her rumors after all.

Ben glanced at the dog under Lady Tremaine's sign and at the man on the ground. He put an arm
around Mal and used a hand at her hip to pull her towards him. "Looks like you had a party."

"Not even." Mal rolled her eyes as she put her arms around Ben's neck briefly and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Tonight, when we get back, we need to have a real party. With strawberries and everything." She kissed Ben's cheek. Audrey felt sick. She and Ben had never done that together.

Ben laughed. "Can't have a party without strawberries, huh?" He asked.

"Nope!" Mal declared. "Oh!" She gave Ben a wicked smile. "We could totally break out Auradon's 'grown-up drinks' and get drunk together." She winked at him as everyone exchanged looks at her light-hearted, sarcastic attitude.

Ben snorted. "Sorry Mal, you're still not of the age of consent yet." He told her with raised eyebrows.

Everyone in their little circle laughed. Mal rolled her eyes. "By Auradon's standard, maybe, but on the Isle, I can do whatever I want." She spread her hands wide to accentuate her point.

"Don't even give me that crap." Ben cut her off with a roll of his eyes. "I'd be willing to place money on the fact you've never had a stronger drink than orange juice in your life."

Jay and Carlos began to chuckle and elbow each other as Mal glared. "What are you doing here, again?" She snapped.

"Heard trouble," Jay answered as he composed himself. "What should we do with the people we knock out?" He gestured at the sleeping man on the ground.

"Leave them," Mal said, bending down to untie the attacker. "I don't want any of them in the city. After we get the rest of the innocents out, I'm closing borders. The original evil villains and anyone who gets kicked out of the city will have to survive out here. The blast will keep them out until tomorrow morning, at which time we'll be done."

"I like these things, but they're really noisy and they don't shoot very fast," Jay remarked as he studied his tranquilizer.

"They do their job." Mal shrugged. "Okay, we better keep going." Her eyes landed on Audrey.

"Audrey, are you still interested in going back? If you go with group two, you can return to the city as soon as they find someone who needs to go back. I'm going to keep pushing through." Ben frowned. "Back already? We just started." He asked.

Audrey glanced between Mal and Ben, and then straightened her shoulders. "I think I'm okay." She lied. "I was just a little thrown off by that dog, is all."

Ben nodded in agreement, looking a little green. "Yeah, that thing is nasty." He agreed and shuddered. "You're good to stay here, then?" He asked, holding out his fist for her to tap.

Audrey forced a smile as she fist-bumped him. "Yeah." She nodded. "Let's keep moving." She felt like she had a year ago, walking out the front door after being broken up with and sworn to secrecy by Ben.

"Bye Babe." Mal blew an air kiss to Ben as she picked up her sword from where it had been abandoned on the ground. Ben immediately tugged her closer and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Audrey heard him whisper: "Bye sweetheart," before group two divided from group one and began to walk down the alleyway their crook had come from. Evie and Jay high-fived Mal as they walked
past, and Audrey watched the man she loved, the most important person to her, walk away with an irremovable ring on his finger and a new name on his lips. And at that moment, she'd never hated Mal more.

When they were gone, the Isle queen prodded the man on the ground with her foot.

"Do you know him?" One of the Auradonian recruits asked.

"Clay Clayton," Mal answered. "Strange to see him so angry like this. We used to go to school together. Got paired together for our Evil Schemes final in Year Nine." She shrugged. "Oh well. Let's move on."

Audrey lagged behind for a few minutes to examine Clay. He was actually quite handsome, with a square face and curly dark hair. He couldn't have been more than a bit older or younger than her. In another time, she might have dated him.

It was hard to imagine a younger Mal on the Isle of the Lost, teaming up with him to complete a school project. Audrey wasn't sure what to do with the information Mal had just given her. She swallowed, bent down, and moved Clay's head so he wouldn't get a crick in his neck. Then she picked up her sword, which was forgotten over by the dog, and continued on.

The Isle chill was starting to feel familiar to Audrey. She still couldn't get used to the way every breath felt like she was heaving as her lungs struggled to find the oxygen in the polluted air though. Her leg brushed against something sticking out of the side of a collapsed wall and when Audrey leaned down to wipe away any grudge that had come off onto her leg, she discovered that the bar or beam or whatever it was had actually wiped away a layer of grudge that was coating her skin. She had had no idea her legs were suddenly so dirty. It was the air, she realized. The pollution was so heavy that some things would solidify when your body heat came near, causing thin layers of gunk to freeze onto your bare skin. It was... horrible. She didn't understand how anyone, villain or not, could live in an environment like this.

Mal stepped over a grate and down a narrow passageway, and some disembodied voice called out: "Queen Mal?"

A hand appeared out of a small hole near the base of the building, dirty and grimy. The skin on the person's fingernails was shredded with small, pointed rocks like splinters sticking out. "Help!" They cried, and more voice cried out from... inside the wall? "Help! Help! Help us, please!"

Mal crouched down and took the person's hand. "How many are you?" She asked in a hollow tone.

"Twenty-four," The first person replied in a wavering tone. "The entrance has collapsed and we're trapped. The villains left us because they didn't want to bring the entire place down."

"Left you?" Mal asked. "Left for where?"

"The piers," The person explained. "Everyone deserted when your armies appeared last night. They're holding everyone around the Jolly Roger and in Ursula's shop. The only people they didn't take were people who couldn't move, like us."

"Left for dead," Mal exhaled. "I'm going to get you out of there." She took her hand back from the person and examined the building. It was one that Auradon had left for the villains thirty years ago, and black mold stretched up the sides of it. Relatively tall, and about to crumble. She exhaled. "We'll have to work fast," She decided, tossing her sword to the ground. Several Auradon folks followed her example, but the Islanders frowned and exchanged uneasy looks.
"Mal," One of the Islanders frowned. "We can't do anything. If we try and make an opening, the building will come down on their heads. There's nothing we can do to help them."

Mal leveled her gaze. It was clear she knew this, and she was doubtful, but she still had to try. Audrey swallowed. "Can we find where the entrance collapsed and try to clear it from there? The stones will be looser."

"It'll be unstable there," the same Islander protested. "Where one collapse happened, another can occur."

Mal chewed on her cheek and considered both ideas. Then she jerked her head to the side and mumbled: "Audrey, come with me." Mal got back to her feet and began to walk around the perimeter of the building. Audrey hesitated, then followed carefully. They turned the corner and discovered a mostly intact wall, and then, on the opposite side, a pile of rubble. Mal crossed her arms and exhaled. "They're at the back of the building. We could clear the rubble, but we'd be here all day. And they're right, the more we clear... some of this mess could be keeping the rest from falling. We could be crushed if we move it."

Audrey examined the awful spread of rock and beam. She swallowed. "Are you just going to... leave them?" She whispered.

Mal shook her head. 'I can't do that," She whispered. "There's got to be something... something magic."

Magic. Audrey's blood felt like ice. Mal exhaled and rubbed her fingers together. "Let's walk back," She mumbled. "I'll think of something... a rhyme." She turned and began to walk back the way she'd come. Audrey stayed in place, examining the wreckage with a thumping heart. She turned to follow Mal, and then something wooden stuck out to her.

"Mal?" She called, and then stepped into the mess. She heard Mal take a quick gasp and began hurrying back, and so she clambered over another, larger rock before the Isle Queen could pull her back.

"Audrey, that's unstable!" Mal gasped. Audrey furrowed her brow and pointed. "There's something wooden. Right there, see? I think it might be a door."

Mal paused and then carefully stepped atop a rock to see where Audrey was pointing. She shook her head. "It's covered by boulders, Audrey. We have the same problem as before. If we move too much, the rest of the building will crumble."

Audrey balled her fists up. There were people stuck down there in that horrible air who would die if they left them behind. She had to try something. "You can use your magic to hold it together," She declared, continuing her trek through the crumbling rocks. Black mold and a thick, oily layer of grime stuck to her hands and legs. She tossed her sword to the side and then used both hands to navigate around a portion of rectangular rock that was twice the size of her entire body. Her foot slipped and the ground gave way underneath her. She yelped as she felt her entire leg fall into a mini sinkhole and clamped her mouth shut to keep from screaming as she felt something slithering.

A wave of green magic washed over all of the rocks and the entire building as if the entire premises had suddenly been covered in glowing green plastic. Audrey looked back to Mal. Her eyes were lit up and her hands were outstretched as she worked to hold the entire building together. Shouts came from the other side. "Hurry!" Mal urged through gritted teeth. "I'm going to try and hold it all together."
Audrey pulled her leg back up. A small, bloody gash had formed underneath her kneecap, but she was otherwise unharmed. She got to her feet and hurried over to the door as voices came around the side of the building. The rest of their group appeared. Audrey watched Mal's Isle friend, Carlos, take in the situation and began clambering over rocks to help her.

Audrey reached the door and brushed the pebbles away. She pulled a rather sizable stone away from the edge of the frame and peered underneath. The door had fallen on top of a staircase going down, effectively protecting it from being covered with rubble. "There's an entrance here!" She announced and began trying to lug boulders off of the edge of the frame so that she could try to get inside. Carlos jumped over a large stone and, squeezing his frame in-between two large stones on top of the door, used his feet to push them off. He forced his fingers underneath the splintered frame and pulled up, creating about a foot's worth of space that Audrey added to by shuffling around the small pebbles on the ground to create a depression big enough for someone to be lifted through.

Carlos huffed with the effort of keeping the door lifted and turned to Audrey. "They're probably locked in a room down there. Maybe the villains left the key. You need to slip down and see if you can find them."

"Go... down there?" Audrey gasped, staring down into the depths of the dark staircase. There could be all sorts of spiders and bugs and... things. Climbing rocks was one thing - she'd gone hiking with her mom before (Hated it, but she'd done it) - but exploring the scary staircase? "Why can't you go?"

"You can't hold up the door and I can't fit through that hole." Carlos rolled his eyes. "Go on, hurry!"

Audrey looked down at the hole and swallowed. She carefully put her feet in and shimmied forward. Her feet found a solid step and she carefully maneuvered her body until her head went under and the world became very, very dark. The air became infinitely harder to breathe. Audrey tried to inhale and abruptly began hacking so hard she had to sit down. The air pollution combined with the musty underground air made for a deadly combination.

"Is there enough light for you to see?" Carlos called down from above.

Audrey couldn't respond as she looked all around. Barely, was the answer. She could see the faint outlines of the steps and the walls, but almost nothing else. She used the wall to stand back up, still coughing, and began the trek down the stairs. The hallway was fairly narrow and with the ceilings stopping about ten inches above her head. She hit the base of the staircase with a stumble and then began feeling the walls for a door. "Hello?" She managed to choke out. "Marco?"

"Hello!" Someone called. "Hello, hello?"

"I'm coming!" Audrey called, hurrying a little through the hallway until her fingers found the rough pattern of a thick, wooden door. She felt around for a handle and, as Carlos had predicted, it was locked. She rammed her shoulder into it experimentally, and her entire side went numb. "I'll be right back!" She called, and then hurried back to the staircase, narrowly avoiding tripping and busting up her hurt knee again. "Carlos!" She yelled. "I need something to pry the door open!"

There was a hesitation, and then Carlos called back: "Can you do that?"

'We're about to find out.' Audrey thought. She climbed up the staircase and shoved her hand up through the hole. "Hand me a sword!" She demanded. After another brief pause, she felt someone put a leather guard in her hand. Immediately, she turned and felt her way back down the stairs. She
found the door again, felt for the handle, and then carefully used the tips of her fingers to feel the blade on the sword. The first thing she realized was that it was backwards, so she had to hold it the correct way. The second thing she figured out was that the very tip was sharper than the blade itself. "Keep away from the door!" She called to the people on the other side before feeling for where the door latched and then sliding her sword into the place where the door and the frame latched. She pushed, hard, and heard something crack, but then the blade stuck fast. She jangled the door handle and found it was loose, but she hadn't broken the handle yet.

"Audrey!" Carlos yelled from up above. "Mal says she can't hold the building together forever. Can you get them out or not?"

Audrey turned to cough into her shoulder from exertion and then put her back against one wall and her feet up on the other. Calling on every ounce of strength she had, she forced the blade into the doorframe. Something snapped, and the door slumped awkwardly to one side. Audrey dropped back to the ground and then carefully pulled the handle. The door swung open on one rusty hinge, revealing a small room packed full of people. She huffed in surprise and leaned against the wall. She'd done it. For several seconds, no one spoke. Audrey was puffing too hard, and the Islanders were so shocked by her appearance they couldn't say anything. She watched their eyes skim her bare legs and her long hair in surprise. It was clear they'd never seen a girl like her before.

"Can you walk?" Audrey finally gasped. "Mal says she can't hold up the building for much longer." At her words, the ceiling rumbled. Everyone jumped into action, pulling each other up. Those who could walk helped those who couldn't and Audrey stayed out of the way as the prisoners walked out. Then, when there were only a few people left, she stepped inside.

The room was smaller than her closet at home. Audrey couldn't understand how they'd fit twenty-four people in here, even though she'd seen them all with her own two eyes. It smelled horrible and the only light came from two or three small holes in the wall. Deep depressions were in the rock where the prisoners had been trying to escape, and there were dark stains on the floor that Audrey didn't really want to think about.

"Maren?" a woman called, leaning down by a small girl who was curled up in a corner of the room. "Can you walk? I can carry you."

There was no answer. Audrey suddenly felt a pit of dread open up in her stomach as she and two other people stepped forward to examine the small child.

"Maren?" The woman asked, confusion lacing her tone as she pulled the girl's head up, only for it to flop there uselessly. A man reached forward and felt along the little girl's neck before taking the woman by the shoulders and pulling her away.

"She's gone, Carol. She's been gone for a while. We have to leave her. The building could come down soon." He told her, pulling her towards the door. "We have to go, now."

Audrey watched the scene, feeling like a knife had been put through her chest. She stared at the little girl in the corner and swallowed as tears filled her eyes. She hadn't been quick enough. They hadn't been quick enough.

The last of the survivors left the room and Audrey brought up the tail, guiding everyone down the hall and up the stairs. Carlos and another Isle boy held the door open while Auradon volunteers helped pull people up to safety, one by one. Last of all was Audrey herself, who handed Carlos his sword and then kept a blank expression as they guided everyone off the rocks and rubble. Mal was shaking from the exertion of holding up the building as they hurried to bring everyone to a safe distance from the pile. Then, she counted backwards. "Three... two... one." She released the magic
keeping the building up, and the rocks around the doorframe slid and plummeted into the ground. Like a chain reaction, the walls around the area crumbled to the ground. A wave of dust kicked up and Audrey heard everyone around her taking deep breaths before the dust hit them like a wall. She squeezed her eyes shut as the sounds of the crumbling building echoed around them.

When all was quiet, Audrey forced herself the open her eyes. The dust was still settling. The building was gone and a giant heap of rubble was in its place. Carlos took a few steps forward to head the group. "Mal?" He called.

Audrey watched a figure rise up from the ground and turn around, and she exhaled in relief. Mal's purple hair shone through the dust and her skin gave off a soft, milky glow as she examined the group with a tactful eye. "How many?" She asked. "All twenty-four?"

"Twenty-three," Audrey announced in a hollow tone. "One casualty. She was dead when I got down there."

Mal's face twisted a little in pain, but she nodded. "We need to take them to the city. Who can do that?" She examined the group. Audrey considered going back to the city, but the thought of Ben's expression came to mind. 'Already'? She kept her hand down as other people raising their hands and volunteered to take people back. Mal picked people out and organized groups, and when all was said and done their group was down to less than twenty. Those headed back to the city departed, and Mal's squadron continued in the opposite direction.

They stalked inwards. It wasn't long before Audrey could hear water. They came to a place where the uneven cobbled streets ended and were suddenly facing some old wood planks. Mal tested one skeptically.

"Should be safe to walk." She announced. "Uma and her crew usually do a good job keeping the wharf safe." She looked around. "I wasn't supposed to come down here much." She admitted. "Uma and I had a fight when we were younger and banned each other from our turfs." She stepped onto the boards and began to walk away. Audrey took her first few steps and quickly realized that the planks were actually bridges, and they were floating. Looking over the sides, she realized that the water was so black and polluted, it didn't reflect anymore. It looked like dark ground from a distance. She leaned out a little, and one of the Isle boys pulled her back.

"If you fall in, it'll be one of the last things you do," he warned. The warning made Audrey's skin cold.

They took a few turns and began to walk past a cluster of holes in a rock face that the bridge stretched in front of. As they passed, they heard a low voice singing: "Tick-tock, tick-tock."

Mal stopped. She was already at the front of the group, but she and Carlos moved so that they were guarding the rest of the group behind them. "Tick-tock, tick-tock." Mal slurred. "I haven't got all day."

There was a shadow, and then a pirate with black charcoal around his eyes appeared. He was wearing a ripped white shirt and a long red overcoat. Clutched in his hand was a curved hook. Mal tilted her head and ran a nail over her lip. Audrey was amazed by how nonchalant she could look despite obviously guarding the Auradonians behind her. "Still running errands and delivering messages for Uma, Harry?" She asked. "Or, do you actually get to call your own shots now?"

The pirate blinked slowly at her. "Well, well, well." He said in a husky tone. "Look wha' the tide pulled in." He smiled. Bits of black lined his gums like he had brushed his teeth with charcoal. His
hair looked like it hadn't been washed in days. He walked towards Mal until he was so close, they were almost breathing the same air and Mal was looking up. "Jus' wait till Uma hears you finally wandered in!" He smiled. "We were beginning to wonder if yer king was gonna let his trophy go wandering." He smirked at Mal, and his eyes roamed her body in a way that made Audrey shrivel just imagining his stare on her. He was like a predator planning to ravage her. Carlos stiffened beside Mal and carefully placed himself to run Harry through with his sword if he tried anything. Despite all this, Mal didn't seem to care that he was acting like he was about to force him on her. She was putting out a toxic force all her own as she guarded her squad against his poisonous gaze. "You know she'll never let you have yer old turf back." Harry slurred like a drunken man. "Queen'er no queen."

Mal blinked as if the idea genuinely surprised her. "Oh!" She said, eyeing the hook as if its presence was offending her. "Well, that's okay." She shrugged. "Because I will be taking it."

For a few seconds, the air intensified as Harry and Mal stared at each other. Then, Harry moved his hand and hooked a long lock of her thick hair. "I could hurt you." He threatened in a low tone. Carlos grew tense, and for a second Audrey was sure he would attack, but then Mal's hand jumped to action and seized Harry's wrist underneath the hook quicker than Audrey could follow.

Mal tilted her head and blinked innocently. "Not without her permission, I bet." She said, staring unblinkingly at him.

Harry blinked his charcoal-rimmed eyes at her. "You better watch your step." He warned, gesturing at the planks below their feet. "Maybe I can't hurt you on... trophy terms, but you've got a lovely little gang behind you." His eyes flickered upward and began to skim Audrey's body like he had Mal's. Audrey shivered, and Harry smiled. "I could always take advantage of yer untrained mates." He threatened

Mal hummed. "Well." She said tersely. "I'll give you a message to take back to Uma since you sound so desperate for one." She hooked her fingers around his hook. Her eyes lit up with a scary green tone that gave Audrey PTSD to when she'd had that stare fixed on her at Beast's Castle. "You lay a hand on any of my mates, especially in any sort of perverted, provocative way." Mal set an arm on Harry's shoulder and leaned in. He began to lean away with his eyes growing wide. "And I will turn you into a clock." Mal finished. She withdrew from Harry, who took a half-step back, gasping for breath.

Harry snickered. "Is that all you've got?" He asked in a raspy tone. "You don't scare me, Daughter of Maleficent." Though his actions certainly didn't mirror his words.

"Well, you don't have to be scared if you keep your hands to yourself," Mal replied. "You've been warned."

Harry chuckled, but he sounded like he'd been forced into a higher octave. He walked backwards into the rock face and vanished.

After several seconds, Mal turned to face her group. "We need to move quicker now." She announced. "He knows these places better than I do."

Everyone nodded, and they began again at a fast pace along the wharf. After a while, they came to several dirt paths that stretched along the edge of the waters. Mal took them up onto the land and they began to make their way to the head of the pier. Around them were buildings, but these were not the buildings of stone like in Mal's turf. These were made of wood and were slowly falling apart from termite damage and wood rot. Audrey had never seen places like this in her life and she couldn't deny that it was fascinating.
As they skirted through buildings, they heard a sudden crash from about forty yards away. Three more subsequently followed. Mal, Carlos, and the other boy from the Isle exchanged looks. "We need to split up and check that out," Carlos whispered.

"It may be a trap," Mal warned.

"It'll become an ambush if we don't." The last boy decided.

"Kay." Mal nodded. She examined everyone. "You three with him, you two with me, and you and Audrey with Carlos." She decided, pointing to different people as she spoke. She patted Carlos on the shoulder. "Take care of them." She told Carlos. Audrey was sure that Mal meant: 'take care of Audrey, who did not dress for the occasion and who may lose her stomach again.' "Try and head to Uma's ship as soon as you're done," Mal commanded.

They divided, going down three separate paths and soon Mal was out of sight and out of earshot.

"So," Carlos started. There was one other Auradon boy in their group. "You're Aurora's kid, right?" Carlos prodded Audrey lightly.

Audrey swallowed. "Yeah, I am." She would have curtseyed, but she was too busy walking. "Princess Audrey."

Carlos nodded. "Mal's mentioned you." He whispered. "Ben's old girlfriend?"

Audrey's shoulders slumped. What an awful title. "Yeah." She admitted. "He broke up with me when they brought Mal over."

"That must have been hard." Carlos nodded. "I'm not sure what to think of Ben." He admitted. His voice had a sudden guard in it, as if he was talking, but wasn't sure if he should be. "We were all convinced she was being tortured and taken advantage of over here."

"Tortured?" Audrey blinked. The Auradon boy behind them seemed equally surprised at that revelation. "Auradon doesn't torture people."

Carlos laughed. He turned and stared at her incredulously. "Auradon doesn't- yeah, good one." They continued walking as Carlos chuckled.

"What?" Audrey asked, cross. "They don't."

Carlos gestured to their surroundings. "And what do you call this?" He asked.

Audrey was taken so off guard she slipped in her flip flops and slid on her butt. Her sword clattered to the ground. She had no answer. Carlos grew cross.

"Yeah." He snapped. "Auradon definitely doesn't torture people. They definitely don't lock kids away all their lives and starve them for the crimes of their parents. God forbid they send ordinary criminals to fend their way with the villains! And they'd never send people actual trash to live off of!" Carlos drove his sword firmly into the ground at Audrey's feet. "Auradon is full of liars and people who will only take advantage of you! They discriminate against anyone they don't like and push people to villainy only to-"

An arrow whizzed over Carlos's head, nicking his scalp. Everyone's attention shot to where an archer in black stood on top of a crumbling dwelling.

Audrey scrambled to her feet and picked up her sword. Carlos tried to yank his blade out of the
earth, but it had stuck. He paled. "Oh no." He whispered.

"It's an ambush!" The Auradonian boy yelled. Seconds later, a second arrow was loosed and went straight through his calf. He fell with a yell.

People appeared from the shadows of the crumbling buildings as Carlos tugged at his sword with a renewed fury. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead as he yanked to no avail. Audrey watched in growing horror as she slowly recognized the people appearing. A tall man with a feathered hat and a curly beard… Captain Hook. A dark-skinned shadow player… Dr. Facilier. And a large, imposing man with more muscles than she could count. Gaston.

Audrey screamed, fumbled her sword, and dropped it.

"Oh, for god's sake, woman!" Carlos yelled at her. He gave up trying to yank his own sword and seized hers off the ground. He gave it a wide test swing as Captain Hook unsheathed his own gleaming weapon. He readied his sword, and Carlos rushed him. It was a quick battle. The Captain and Carlos locked swords for a few seconds before the Captain's strength forced Carlos to give in. He tried to swing for Hook, but Hook caught his sword mid-swing with his own, and the weapon flew out of reach. Meanwhile, Gaston and Facilier were approaching Audrey with menacing smiles on their faces.

Audrey let loose a cry of despair and leaped out of their reach. She heard footsteps following her, and Carlos swearing like he was the sailor instead of Hook. She dashed down the wharf and towards the water. Gaston and Facilier remained hot on her heels as she turned a corner and sprinted desperately for where she'd last seen Mal. If she could make it there, Mal had another group. She'd protect her.

Unfortunately, she'd never reach Mal. She felt Gaston reach for the nape of her neck, could feel his breath behind her when suddenly something pale and blue appeared on the left side of her vision. She squeezed her eyes shut, thinking it was Facilier, and something with the force of a speeding bull slammed into her shoulder. She was shoved clear off her path, out of Gaston's hands, and off her feet.

Audrey rolled in between two buildings and underneath a small cardboard lean-to, which shuddered and shook above her: Gaston, who was thrown off by the new arrival, tripped and skidded face-first into the dirt. Facilier slipped in the dirt beside him and tumbled to the side of the road.

Audrey watched the newcomer brace himself for an attack. He was tall, dressed in dark blue, and holding one of Mal's Isle swords with a trained, precise hand. His face and head were covered by a black knit scarf. He looked as strong and imposing as all the knights in her dreams or any of the Auradon Knights. She watched him brace his feet and her heart fluttered - just a little bit. She could see the outlines of his jaw through the scarf as he held his sword aloft and watched Gaston get to his feet. Neither Gaston nor Facilier had a sword, but Gaston growled as he wretched a wooden beam support right out from underneath the awning of one of the surrounding establishments. This he readied in his hands.

The masked man attacked. He brought a swift blow down on Gaston's head and immediately took a chunk of wood out of the beam. He used his arm to force the beam - and Gaston's arm - to the ground and then jabbed at the older man's arm. Gaston barely got away with a deep slice stretching across his bicep. The masked man continued, forcing Gaston back onto his knees and then his back. The older man was forced to use the beam primarily for defense. Facilier couldn't get close enough to help as the flash of the sword swinging came down over and over, taking chunks and leaving divots in the large beam. Audrey was in awe. The only person she'd ever seen fight
remotely similar to this Isle warrior was Ben in his Auradon Prep days, but even his best fighting
couldn't hold a candle to what she was seeing now. There was a snap, and the beam split into two
above Gaston's head. The splinters flew into the villain's face, and Gaston abruptly kicked out,
trying to take out the man's legs. A sword came down in his path, and Gaston's boot was cut open.

Audrey carefully tried to move and flee. In the event Gaston looked around, it was entirely possible
he'd see her where she'd fallen. The lean-to structure above her head shuddered and promptly
collapsed on top of her head, effectively shielding her from view and filling her vision with stars.
Before Gaston or Facilier could ever look over to the crash, the masked man dropped his sword
grabbed Facilier and flung him down a small slope. He reached down to snatch his sword back up,
but Gaston has used the distraction with Facilier to seize the hero's weapon and now jumped to his
feet and held the sword to the man's throat. Facilier scrambled to his feet and balled his fists up as
the masked man tried to retreat a few steps.

Audrey watched in horror as the two villains forced him to his knees and Gaston seized the man's
hat and flung it aside. He seized the man's sandy blonde hair and wrested his head back. The
man's disguise was jostled aside. Audrey had to clamp a hand over her mouth.

It was Ben

Gaston stamped on Ben's legs to keep him from moving. Ben's face twisted in pain, but he refused
to call out. "You son of a Beast!" Gaston yelled in his face, spit flying everywhere as Ben leaned
away. "How dare you —"

"Gaston." Facilier purred, drawing the older man's temper away as he held Ben's shoulders and
pinned Ben's knees under his feet. Ben groaned as his head arched back and his knees were driven
into the ground at uncomfortable angles.

Gaston calmed down enough to see who he'd caught. There were several long seconds where there
was nothing except Audrey praying that they wouldn't recognize him.

No chance.

"Son of a Beast." Gaston purred, hoisting Ben to his feet and wrapping a hand around his throat.
"Son of a Beast." He began to laugh.

They were distracted. If Audrey hurried, she could use the same scare tactic Ben had used and push
Ben out of their grasp. Ben might lose a bit of hair, but he'd be free and alive.

Then Facilier joined in, laughing with Gaston, and Audrey shrank. What could she do? She was a
small, tired, useless girl with no previous Isle experience. It took all of her strength to hold back a
few heartbroken sobs as the two villains hauled Ben away, heading to the end of the wharf. She
buried her face in her hands and broke into silent sobs.

Chapter End Notes

One thing Mal knew about life or death situations from previous altercations is that
when you're about to die, and your body knows it, you get the craziest, most
kinetically impossible ideas. And sometimes, they even work.

Mal saw her entire life flash before her eyes before she leaped into action. Birth,
childhood, to now. Sometime around when she was kissing Ben for the first time in his
car, she paused her life video so that she could execute her crazy plan and live. As
Uma's blade came down on her head, she swayed and rolled right around Uma's legs,
which was no easy feat considering the railing on the ship was rounded and polished
and hovering above the ground. As Uma was trying to pivot around without falling,
Mal kicked her in the knees. Uma dropped her sword, which tumbled off of the ship
and hit Maleficent's tail on the way down, in order to catch herself in the railing. Mal
scrambled away by balancing along the balcony railing as it creaked and wiggled
underneath her and Uma's combined weight.

Above her, Audrey, Evie, Jay, Ben, Lonnie, and everyone was trying to pull
themselves up to secure their safety from the fall. Most of the fighting had ceased as
everyone struggling to keep from falling to the ground and the dragon below. Mal's
eyes skimmed her surroundings and she came to a quick conclusion: She needed to
level the playing field.

She left her sword next to the deck, grabbed the edge of the railing, checked to see that
Uma still had not fully regained her balance, and swung down over the side of the
ship. She heard Ben, Audrey, and Lonnie shout in surprise. She held on by clutching
her knees around the railing and using her hands as if she were climbing a ladder as
she examined the lines that were holding the ship to the ground. There were nine in all,
extremely thick, and secured using many strong loops to both the ship's railing and to
concrete pillars down on the dock. The wharf had been partially destroyed when the
ship went airborne, but those pillars weren't going to budge. On the other hand, the
old, rickety Jolly Roger might lose half of its hull if the strain wasn't leveled.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The Isle Rush. Mal's army storms the villain's ship and she meets someone very special. The news of Ben's capture is delivered to Mal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Check out my partner xez2003's new Descendants AU Fic. 'The Black Arrow - A tale of the Two Kingdoms'. I'm one of the betas for it!

Mal squinted down at Uma's ship. It was actually a little bit... better than she remembered it. It had been patched and the ropes recoiled, and everything polished to gleam. It was also extremely crowded. Sick and dying people lay on the boat deck, crying for help as villains walked to and fro. Mal spotted Ursula down in the sea, Hans and Clayton out on the boat deck, the Queen of Hearts singing: "Off with their Heads!" Over and over as she walked back and forth across the gangplank, and her own mother, Maleficent, down on the boat deck conversing with Uma.

She glanced at her comrades. Almost all of the groups that made up one and two had made it through, with the exception of a few stragglers. Namely Carlos and his group. Mal had visited the area of the crash and found it abandoned with no sign of visitation. She'd assumed that the crash had been caused by the unstable building structure and continued onwards. Besides them, Ben was also missing, but he had a sword, so he should be fine unless he'd somehow run into Captain Hook. And even then, Mal had seen Jay nearly outfight the older man. Anything was possible.

Mal studied the outline of the boat and turned to her peers. "I need a group to help me engage them on the south side." She told them. Someone needs to shoot Ursula. Since she's in the water, it'll take her out for more than a few days. Watch out for her tentacles. Shoot as many villains as you can. Group one will have to take on the villain kids. Rush in, grab anyone you can and rush out. We'll keep the fight going as long as we have to but try to tranquilize anyone who fights back. If they fight back, don't bring them to the city."

Everyone nodded, and people began to whisper the plans to their peers. Mal got up and began to creep down the wharf carefully. About twelve people followed her, including Evie. Jay stayed behind to man the rest of the group, and everyone accepted him as the 'Away leader'. Mal trusted Jay to be reasonable.

Once set on the south side, Mal directed a member of her group who held a stun gun to shoot the Queen of Hearts, who was mumbling her mantra as she continued her stroll. They readied their gun, aimed, and fired.

The queen toppled into the water below. Mal's group emerged from their hiding place and began to shoot more while the people with swords began to rush to the ropes that secured the boat to the shore. As Mal prepared to run, she spotted a black, white, and red figure racing down the hill with a tan princess on his heels and an immobilized boy on his back. Carlos.
Mal hesitated as they got closer. She stared at the arrow sticking out of the boy's leg as he cried in pain. "What happened?" She growled.

"Ambush." Carlos gasped. He put the boy on the ground.

"Fine, fine!" Mal growled. She tapped a member of group one on the shoulder. "Please take him back to the city." She asked.

The man nodded. "Yes, your highness." He agreed and quickly hoisted the boy onto his back. Behind Mal, chaos was starting to unfold. Ursula was rising out of the sea as her group started to attack the ship.

Carlos dropped two swords that he'd been clutching to his chest as he ran to the ground. He handed one to Audrey, who began to shake just holding it, and picked one up. "Where is everyone?" He cursed.

"Up on the rise," Mal answered, pointing. "We're the diversion. Don't aim to kill but take as many villains as you can out of the fight." Carlos nodded and sprinted into the fight. Mal turned to Audrey, who had started to cry.

"Mal." Audrey croaked out as tears fell down her face. "Mal, I can't do this. I'm not you. I'm not selfless enough, or strong enough. Ben was right to choose you over me. Please… I'll only make things worse."

Mal blinked. Where had the confident girl who'd climbed over all that wreckage gone? "I meant that I needed you, Audrey. Come on, I need your help."

"No! Mal, you don't understand!" Audrey sobbed, scrubbing at her cheeks. "I just saw… I'm too weak."

Mal put her hand on Audrey's cheek, keeping her from scrubbing at her eyes. She took a deep breath. "Whatever just happened, it'll be alright." She promised, mentally kicking herself for sending the girl with Carlos. She should have kept her nearby. "Now come on." She gestured to the ship. "I have a job for you. You are strong enough. You are fast enough. Audrey, you are enough."

Mal smiled at Audrey as the older girl took several deep breaths and began to compose herself. Then, Mal turned to the battle and saw a great number of the villains had not been expecting their tranquilizers and were falling in great numbers. She let loose a wicked grin and yelled: "Now!"

From up on the high rise there came a yell. Jay's group appeared out of the bushes and rushed down the hill towards the ship in a mighty wave of people. The villains paused in their fights to gape at the sheer amount of people bearing down on them. At that moment, four people all turned at the exact same time and shot Ursula in the back of her neck as she was trying to climb out of the water to get to Mal. Ursula's eyes rolled back in her head as she let loose a massive scream, and she toppled back into the filthy waters. The ropes holding the boat down broke and the gangplank shuddered. Captain Uma and First Mate Harry Hook leaped into action, desperately trying to keep the ship as Jay's group rushed into action. People were scooped up off the deck, and the heroes began to rush out of there.

Mal hefted her sword and rushed into battle. She had a mom to see, after all. Audrey followed on her tail with an intense, angry expression. She'd failed Mal before, but Mal had a feeling that would never happen again.

They stormed the ship. Within the space of a few minutes, all prisoners had been evacuated off the
upper deck. The villains tried to use the prisoners as leverage by holding knives and swords to their
necks, but they were shot and knocked out before the threat could lead to any real harm. Villains
and their children still streamed out from below deck, leading Mal to believe that there were more
prisoners in the hold. Probably smaller children and adults, given that most people on the deck
were teenagers and tweens. All children of the villains and imprisoned people of the Isle.

Someone held up a length of dynamite, which was another forbidden item Auradon wasn't
supposed to let over, and began to holler: "I'll light it up! Don't think I-" They were cut off with a
stun gun to the back.

As Mal's feet hit the deck, she saw someone in black slip into the bridge of the ship. She ran,
weaving around swords and foes and random stun blasts, and kicked the door open from the
outside. Inside, Maleficent stood behind a wooden table, drumming her long, dirty nails on the
table. Mal was caught so off-guard by her mother's appearance that she skidded to a stop and stared
at the older woman for several seconds. Maleficent examined her daughter with a raised eyebrow,
saying nothing. Dark bags were under her mother's eyes and sparse hairs fell out from underneath
the cap. Maleficent didn't look well at all. She looked like she was sick, or exhausted to the point
of illness.

Maleficent seemed to be examining her as well. Examining her hair, straight and long. Examining
her face, her well-toned muscles, the ring on her finger. Maleficent raised her head in a silent
motion of approval as if she were mentally congratulating herself on setting Mal up to be so well
cared for. Mal felt her blood run hot with anger. How many nights had she planned her vengeance?
How many times had she sworn she'd destroy her, or at least get back at her for setting her up with
the Prince of Auradon? All for this. She had a sword and her traitorous, unarmed mom all in one
room. She turned back towards the doorway and then, without a word, walked back out, and shut
the door behind her.

"Hey, you!" She declared, pointing at someone with a stun gun as they set a villain toppling to the
ground. "Can you shoot my mom? She's behind this door here." She kicked the door a little, and
the person, while looking a little stunned, nodded. Mal stepped aside and watched them fling the
door open. There was a flash of light where Mal had to close her eyes, and then she listened to her
mom slump to the floor inside. Her legs shook.

Mal leaned against the wall and forced herself to wretch her eyes open to thank the person who'd
made sure Maleficent wouldn't appear to hurt anyone. "Thank you," She nodded and was surprised
to find her eyes were filled with tears.

She didn't understand why she was so worked up. After all, she had a new family and a new life.
And it was a natural idea that kids grow up and leave their parents behind. Mal had a husband now
and had lived without her mom just fine for over a year now. And it wasn't like she didn't have a
mom - Belle loved her just as much as she loved Ben, and maybe more, in some ways. She didn't
need her real mom. Her real mom who was twisted and toxic and who had only ever cared about
getting off the Isle and never about her daughter.

Mal wiped her eyes and straightened up as a shadow descended over her. She put her sword up on
instinct, heard the sound of another sword hitting hers, and discovered a girl with teal braids and a

Uma sneered down at Mal. "Miss me, loser?"

Mal took a whiff of her opponent. "You still stink." She commented.

Uma bared her teeth and pushed down. Mal rolled out of the way, and Uma narrowly missed
chopping off Maleficent's leg. "Come on, Mal!" She howled. "Let's finish this, once and for all!"

Mal barely had time to plant her feet underneath her before Uma came at her again. She yelped as she leaned back and saw Uma's sword slice the air her nose had just vacated. She brought her own sword up and Uma's next slash was interrupted by the presence of Mal's own weapon. Thus began a bloodthirsty exchange of clashes. The two girls dodged and parried each other's blows, driving themselves around the deck and avoiding the fallen villains as they fought. For every blow Uma tried to deal, Mal held a counter. For every time Mal rushed in for a defeat, Uma had a retaliation.

Finally, Uma drove Mal towards the edge of the deck level, and when Mal jumped to dodge her next jab, she slipped and fell to the next level of the deck below. Her sword skittered out of reach as all the wind was knocked out of her. Uma jumped down on top of her and raised her sword to bring it down on Mal's head. Mal tried to sluggishly scuttle backwards to grab her sword to almost no avail.

Someone let loose a wild war cry and rushed over. As Uma started to bring the sword down on top of Mal's head, Audrey appeared out of nowhere with her own sword raised high to protect her. The two swords clanged at each other and Uma's almost flew out of her hand as the girl fought to regain her balance.

Mal rolled out from under Uma's legs as Audrey swung at the surprised Uma and nicked the girl's ear. However, her swings were sloppy, and Mal knew it wouldn't be long before Audrey had nothing more to give. She leaped for her sword. A boot landed on the blade, pressing it to the ground. Harry Hook smiled down at her. He leaned down with a conspiratorial look on his face.

"Word is you brought the king here, to the Isle of the Lost. What, is he actually going to let you run free off your leash now?" Harry asked with a wicked grin. Mal growled. She was getting really sick of people assuming Ben was abusing her.

"What leash?" Mal spat.

Harry leered down at her. "Y'know, I was hoping he'd knock a bit o' that spirit outta you. Hmm, doesn't look like it, huh?"

"In your dreams, Hook." Mal rolled her eyes. She used the handle of her sword to pull her legs out from under her and lashed out at Harry's knee. The bridge of her foot collided with his knee and there was a loud popping sound. Harry cursed and crashed. Mal whipped her sword away and wheeled as Audrey was forced into a crouch by Uma, the better swordsman. This couldn't go on forever.

"Hey!" Mal yelled at a member of group two who was rushing off the ship with a small girl hanging on his shoulders. She pointed at Uma. "Shoot her!" She yelled and rushed in.

She kicked Uma off of Audrey and raised her sword as if she was going to force the girl to lock swords with her. As Uma raised her weapon, the boy shot, and Uma was knocked out cold. Mal stayed above her opponent for a few more seconds, huffing and puffing, and then straightened up and looked around.

The deck was quiet. As far as Mal could tell, every villain had been apprehended. Mal walked over to Audrey and held a hand up for the panting girl.

"Thanks." Audrey wheezed as she tried to catch her breath.

"No, thank you." Mal smiled. "You saved my life, and look! There's not even a scratch on you."
She met Audrey's brown eyes as the girl began to smile a little in self-pride. "Ben's going to be so proud of you," Mal said.

Audrey's smile faded immediately. "Mal, I have to tell you--"

But Mal already knew what she was going to say. 'I'm sorry for all the petty things I did and all that jazz'. "Not now." She interrupted. "Let's go below deck and make sure everyone has been vacated, okay?"

Audrey looked like she wanted to protest, but she obeyed Mal. Mal glanced around the deck and sighed sadly at all the island rebels that were slumped over across the deck planks. All of them had ruined their chances to get into the city.

The stairs were at the front of the ship, underneath a square trapdoor. People were still wandering up and down with people on their backs and in their arms. "How many more are there?" Mal asked with a frown. A couple of people murmured responses, "Thirty? Forty?", but no one seemed sure. That didn't sound like very good news to Mal. She wished there was a way to pull the Jolly Roger out and around to the dock. Or to bring cars or ATV's past the bridge to get to here. Unfortunately, none of these longer-distance things existed on the Isle because the need simply wasn't there yet. Maybe one day.

Audrey and Mal headed below deck and immediately had to hold their noses. The hull smelt of body odor and human feces. There was almost no light, and at least sixty people remained. The last few members of the two groups were hoisting moaning individuals onto their backs, but it was clear that there would have to be second trips. Mal frowned. Where was Ben?

"Is this the only other place we have prisoners being kept?" She asked aloud. People exchanged looks. It seemed no one quite knew the answer. Mal and Audrey exchanged a glance, and then they linked their arms together and lifted a man whose leg was bloodied and twisted. They carefully navigated the stairs and set him on the deck before returning below deck to try and continue pulling people out of the dark and dingy area.

On their third trip up, Carlos was waiting for them, tight-lipped with worry. "Mal," He gasped when he saw her. He turned and pointed up on the bluff, where a small group of people was visible. "We have... people being kept in those buildings. At least forty others in one room alone, maybe more. The doors are locked. We're breaking the locks now, but we're going to need lots of help."

Mal exhaled with a sigh. "I wonder if there would be any way for me to spell a cart or something to take people in?" She asked aloud. People exchanged looks. It seemed no one quite knew the answer. Mal and Audrey exchanged a glance, and then they linked their arms together and lifted a man whose leg was bloodied and twisted. They carefully navigated the stairs and set him on the deck before returning below deck to try and continue pulling people out of the dark and dingy area.

"Okay. Maybe I will try and spell something. For now, do what you can and take who you can. Audrey and I are going to keep trying to help people and... there's just so many." She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'll think of something," She decided. "Just... keep working. Maybe see if you can find some long boards."

The deck continued to fill up steadily. Soon, they were having to move the unconscious villains aside to make way for the people who needed help. Mal considered yanking Uma's hair out of spite as she passed by, but decided against it when Ben's disapproving face came into her mind. Speaking of Ben, where was he? Maybe he had found someone and taken them into the city when she hadn't been looking. That would make sense.

There were scores of people. Mal tried to keep track of the people she and Audrey carried up but
lost count around seventy-seven when she realized that other people were also helping them bring people up and some were being escorted to the city, meaning her count would be inaccurate in the end. She could see, a little, how many people were being escorted out of buildings, and that was an even higher number.

"I need a scout," Mal gasped to Audrey as they set down a teenager, not much older than herself, with black hair. "Can you run up and check on the surrounding buildings? Call for people, and make sure there isn't anyone else trapped? I'll have to see what I can do to help people get to the city faster." Audrey nodded, though she looked a little uneasy to be apart from Mal, and picked up a sword. She and Mal hiked up the bluff and then Audrey disappeared as Mal went to the group.

Carlos was dropping a large plywood board onto a stack of similarly shaped boards. He glanced up as he heard Mal striding forward. "Will this do?" He mumbled, gesturing to the small pile. Mal exhaled with a sigh.

"We'll just have to take this one step at a time," she decided. "If only we'd known ahead of time how many people were trapped. I honestly had no idea how many people could be on the Isle because Auradon's records were so full of holes when they were handed to me."

"That and they're ignorant." Carlos wrinkled his nose. "It'd take a hole the size of the moon to cover up this all on its own."

Mal laughed a little and then took a board and examined it tactfully. "I don't know if this will work, but I've got to try." She sighed. She and Carlos carefully laid two people who were nearly unconscious on a board and Mal swallowed as she touched the side of it. "Noble steed, proud and fair; take them to the city there."

The board lifted a few inches off of the ground and drifted away, en route to the Isle city. Mal watched it go carefully and then nodded. "I don't know if I can do all of them, but I can do some of them. Who's next?"

"I don't know if that'll be necessary," Someone announced behind her. Mal turned and paused when she saw Jay, standing with his back to the ship and his arms crossed. Mal examined the lines in his face as he tried to keep his spine straight and meet her eyes and act like they were still exactly the way they'd once been. Carefully, he turned and gestured to the ship behind him. Mal turned and her mouth fell open. At least two hundred, probably more, people from the city, Auradon guards, and volunteers had returned, walking around the bluff just out of sight. She turned to Jay, whose gaze finally fell to the ground. "I brought reinforcements," He cleared his throat. "I've still got your back, Daughter of Maleficent."

Mal's eyes filled with a few tears at that statement. Of course he did. Of course he was still in her court, even after all this time and all these years. She nodded, trying to convey through every sense of her being that she was appreciative of him, and stepped forward to give him a quick hug around the shoulders. "Thanks, Jay, for everything."

When Mal released him, Jay looked a great deal calmer. He turned towards the docks, lifted two fingers to his lips, and whistled. People down on the docks looked up, and Mal and Jay raised their arms above their heads. "We have people up here!" He called. "Hurry!"

"Mal!" Audrey gasped, reappearing from around a corner looking completely winded. "I checked everywhere around here. There's only one other small place right at the base of the wharf in that building there-" She pointed to a relatively stable building about fifty feet from the shoreline. "And there's only ten or so there. Unless you want to scout the Isle, I think we have most of your citizens covered."
"Fantastic," Mal exhaled, smiling with a sigh of relief. She turned to Jay. "Are Mercy, May, and Myth already checking people in?"

"Yeah," Jay confirmed. "They're using the same message and everything. We don't know if everyone will stay - they might decide to become villains again after they're healed - but they're asking anyone who's conscious and treating everyone else outside the barrier if they can't confirm. No one is trying to break your rules. Believe me, your citizens are fiercely protective of the rules."

Mal nodded in approval and relief. "Maybe I'll make a temporary exception for those who are unconscious, just so that when the rebels wake up tomorrow there's no trouble, but I'll make that decision later. Do you have any numbers for me?"

"Two hundred," Jay responded, still waving people up onto the bluff. Mal rolled her eyes. "No, really, Jay. How many have they checked in?" She asked. Jay turned to blink unfoundedly at her.

"No, I'm serious. Two-hundred-twenty-seven before I left about an hour to a half-hour ago. And hundreds of people are waiting beside the gates to go inside. You might have to get more cards. Your city's population is about to blow." Jay replied, speaking a little slowly so that Mal could grasp the full meaning of his words. Her mouth fell open.

"For real? I - I had probably better get back to help give people cards and... oh my goodness." She held her hands to her cheeks a little bit. "This is just... mind-boggling."

"Do you have enough space for everyone?" Jay asked, furrowing his brow.

Mal nodded. "Yes, and I can always pay for more buildings anyways. I just... wasn't really anticipating all of this. Who would have thought the Isle of the Lost could house so many?"

Jay put a hand on her shoulder and pointed down to the ship. "I think someone's trying to get your attention." He pointed. Mal watched as someone jumped up, waving their arms to the top of the bluff. She nodded in agreement and Jay patted her arm. "Go and help out down there. Carlos and I will take care of this crowd."

Mal nodded and turned to nod at her old partner. "Thanks again, Jay. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up."

Jay nodded, and Mal began to hike back down. Audrey followed her, huffing a little as she navigated the steepish slope. They slipped onto the gangplank and navigated around people picking up Isle victims. Already, the deck was half-cleared. The person who'd been waving her down was the same short Isle boy who had been with Mal and her group earlier that day. "Queen Mal!" He gasped, pointing down the length of the ship. "You're needed below deck."

Mal frowned. The staircase was rather congested as people finished bringing up prisoners. "Has there been a death?" She asked, examining the people coming up and down.

The boy shook his head. "No, ah, ahem, you should see for yourself," He choked.

Mal and Audrey exchanged a look, and then they began to head to the staircase. People cleared a little as they saw her coming. Mal descended the stairs with an air of trepidation falling over her. She stepped over Drizella Tremaine and came face-to-face with Evie. Evie looked as ethereal as ever, but her face was pinched with worry.

"Mal." She said softly. "There's something you need to see." Evie ushered Mal to the back of the
hull, where there was a door. Mal twisted the handle and peered inside. There were three small children under the age of two, all hungry and emancipated, and one cradle. Audrey gasped under her breath. Rescuers appeared in the doorway to take the children as Evie, Audrey, and Mal approached the cradle.

When they first peered inside, Audrey gasped again, and clapped her hands to her mouth. Mal's hands curled over the hilt of her sword as she bit the inside of her cheek hard.

Inside was a baby with white porcelain skin, as beautiful as the Auradon sunrise. She had no freckles, and her bare feet waved in the air as she slept. She appeared to be well-taken-care-of but was dirty nonetheless. Atop her head were long strands of bright purple hair.

Evie reached into the cradle and carefully moved the child's arm. Mal let out a breath as she spotted a dragon-shaped black ink mark curling around the girl's skin. It was the mark of Maleficent, matching the one on Mal's shoulder. This was a daughter of Maleficent who had been branded as such.

Mal turned to Evie. "Did you know about this?" She hissed.

Evie shook her head. "No. But the baby is obviously a few days – definitely less than a week old. I never even knew Maleficent was pregnant, even if she did go a little crazy a few weeks ago…" She trailed off.

Mal closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her head. "She… must have gotten pregnant… what, last November?" She looked at Evie, who nodded. November, as in when Mal had taken control of the moorlands and when the Isle of the Lost had changed hands.

"She must have realized you weren't coming back," Audrey whispered. Mal reached down and put her finger in the little girl's grasp. This was her little sister. Her brand-new baby sister. And her mom had planned to keep her on the Isle. Mal's eyes filled with tears. This was Mal's replacement. A girl Maleficent had hoped to raise up to be eviler than her first daughter.

Audrey helped Mal spread out the blankets, and they carefully wrapped the newborn up. She was so small her fingers and toes were still that mottled miscoloring most babies have. Mal would be willing to bet she still had her umbilical cord.

Once the baby was swaddled, Mal held her sister to her chest and they carried her out of the room. They checked all the other rooms, but everyone had been vacated. People were being carried away towards the city while others congregated on the deck.

Up on deck, Carlos waited with a small group of other people, all with stun guns. They had no idea how many rebels had escaped them and were waiting out, but so far there had been no problems with carrying everyone back. When Carlos spotted the tiny child in Mal's arms, his eyes bugged out and he dropped the gun. "W-Where'd she come from?" He gasped.

"My sister," Mal answered, pressing the little girl against her chest protectively. "We'll figure this out back in the city." She glanced around at the hundred-odd people who were waiting for instructions. Mal swallowed. "Let's finish up and go home," She announced. "Our work here is done."

Hours later, after the ship had been vacated by the heroes, Gaston, Dr. Facilier, and Captain Hook, stomped up to the ship with their prized prisoner in tow. They bound Ben's hands and legs to the mast and stomped around the deck, scuffing their shoes as they evaluated the damage. They tested
a few people's necks, figured everyone was asleep, and set about fixing the physical damages.

"Maleficent's brat sure made a mess of things!" Hook snapped as he fixed the ropes that strung up to the mast. Meanwhile, Gaston tossed bits of wreckage overboard with a permanent scowl etched across his features.

"She'll be back!" He declared, pausing to glare at the young king bound in the center of the ship. "And this time, we'll be ready for her."

Ben twisted his hands in their bindings. He'd heard the battle, heard the sounds of Auradon and Isle success, and had been unable to call for help. Now, he had the honorable task of being bait. He swallowed and bowed his head, hoping Mal wouldn't rain down too much fire on his captors.

Acres of people stretched alongside the great walls of the city, all the way to Mal's old bridge. At least three hundred people, for a minimal estimate, lay on the ground as Isle and Auradon workers worked to revive and to treat people enough to agree or disagree to Mal's city conditions. Still more people were being brought from the Dark Isle into the light one. Myth, Mercy, and May hurried from place to place, giving Mal's conditions and assigning rooms and cards as quickly as possible. As news slowly came back that all of the Isle people had been rescued from the ship, some volunteers dropped their efforts, much to Mal's dismay. Large groups of volunteers from Auradon collapsed in the hot sand of the city and fell asleep. Guns and swords were abandoned at the gated entrances.

"Queen Mal!" Someone summoned her as she neared the group, clutching the small body to her chest. May rushed forward with her hand in the air. "We need help," She gasped. "We can only recite the incantations inside the barrier, and the entrance is too crowded with sick people who can't make the promises. What should we do?"

Mal exhaled, keeping her hands, one of the baby's neck and the other on its bottom to support her, and nodded. "I'm going to make an exception in my rules for this event only." She sighed. "For now, anyone who is unconscious is allowed inside, but when they wake up they will be required to make oaths with me in my city. And for today only, I'll let you use your magic in the barrier. And I'll be along to help you soon - just let me find a place for her." She gestured to the child that was slumbering against her chest. May nodded, looking a little overwhelmed, and Mal turned to find someone who could hold onto her sister for a few seconds so she could mess with the barrier. Evie and Audrey stood behind her, waiting. Mal held the baby out to Evie. "Evie, can you mind her for a few minutes while I stand here and fix the barriers to help everyone?" She asked.

Evie nodded and took the baby from Mal, fumbling her a little and then letting her settle into her arms. Mal felt a little tense watching the tiny girl go, even though it was just Evie. She closed her eyes and quickly started feeling for the barrier, knowing that the sooner she finished her task, the sooner she'd be able to take her sister back.

The barrier was a bit harder to find from the dark part of the Isle. She had to search through the pollution and there was lots of distance. Finally, she finished making her changes and quickly turned to take the baby from Evie. The child's weight felt familiar, if still uncomfortable. Mal carried her baby sister inside. She had no idea what to do. Eventually, the baby would wake and need to be fed and changed. And after that... she had no idea.

"What are you going to do with her?" Audrey asked, dropping her sword beside the gate and glancing at it forlornly as if she weren't sure how she felt about putting it down.

Mal shook her head, turning back to her two friends with a frazzled look in her eyes. "I have... no
idea," She admitted. "I mean, she's my sister. I can't leave her with my mom and I can't let her stay on the bad part of the Isle. But...I don't know what to do with her here either."

Evie stared at the purple wisps of hair peeking out over the blankets. "Well, you're married. Maybe you and Ben..." She trailed off.

Mal shook her head furiously. "I don't think so. I mean, I know Ben wants kids; I know he probably wouldn't be all that disappointed or put-out if I decided that I wanted them right now. But for me? I have two kingdoms and a busy life and I... am not on the same page as he is. Plus, I'm way too young to be caring for a kid. How could I care for a kid I barely have time for anyways? But I can't just give her up or give her to someone else because she's my sister and because family is supposed to stick together. And even if I did give her up, I can't guarantee that someone wouldn't want her just because she's..." Mal paused to catch her breath, and Evie finished her sentence.

"Just because she's the sister of someone famous," Evie nodded.

Mal exhaled and closed her eyes. "I... I have to think. I have to make sure she's okay, and I have to think and talk with Ben and... think."

Audrey flinched in pain as Mal turned and headed towards where Eliza and her mother were talking to newcomers from the dark portion of the Isle of the Lost. Evie and Audrey hung back and watched the purple fairy approach Eliza and Evelyn, and then watched as Eliza led her away to a different building.

Audrey turned and picked her sword back up. She felt a lot stronger when she was holding it. If she'd been holding it when Ben had shown up, things might be different now. She had no idea how to break the news to Mal that her husband had been captured. As she focused on the blade and her reflection in the dirty blade, Carlos tapped Audrey on the shoulder.

"You were pretty brave," Carlos said softly. Audrey hung her head. Carlos opened his mouth to continue but paused as tears filled her eyes.

"You running helped take those two villains off my back. I was able to grab our swords and our teammate before Hook could catch me. He's smart, but not very fast. He's gotten older." Carlos clasped his hands together. "How did you escape?" He asked Audrey.

Audrey hiccupped and began to cry. "I'm a coward." She shook her head. "I'm an awful person."

Carlos looked startled by her outburst. He and Evie exchanged looks. "You... were doing well today?" Evie asked slowly.

Audrey turned to start at them with mascara caked under her eyes and her eyeliner running down her face. "It was Ben." She whispered.

Carlos almost jumped out of his skin. Evie's face was white. There was no sign of the blonde-haired prince anywhere, and he hadn't been seen since... a while. Carlos grabbed Audrey's arm and pulled her to her feet. "Jay!" He yelled as he spotted his friend walking into the area with an unconscious person in his arms. He waved Jay over as Evie began to
comfort Audrey, who was sobbing and wiping her eyes.

"Carlos?" Jay asked, switching the weight of the person in his arms. "What's wrong?"

"Jay." Carlos gasped. "Audrey saw Ben get snatched by Facilier and Gaston. Have you seen him anywhere?"

Jay's face became stony. "I don't exactly make it a point to look for him," Jay said in a sour tone.

"Jay, this is serious!" Carlos hissed. "You know how upset Mal will be!"

Evie put a hand on Jay's shoulder. "We've got to tell her." She declared. "Now."

Jay groaned, but the four of them began to head away, up to the city to find Mal.

Eliza had led Mal to a small house in the city where nameless, abused children were being brought in to be taken care of by some of the Isle people until permanent solutions could be drafted. As Mal stepped in, everyone gasped and the room took on an air of hushed reverence. A woman stood up in the back of the room and hurriedly approached Mal. "Who do you have there?" She asked, looking down at the baby.

Mal swallowed. "Another daughter of Maleficent. I... need someone to look after her while I move everyone outside in. I was told this is the makeshift orphanage, sort of?"

"Sort of," The woman agreed. "So, you're coming back for her, is that right?"

"I am," Mal affirmed. "Hopefully it won't be more than a few hours. I swear I'll come back as soon as I can, and you should know how to hunt me down anyways, right?"

The woman laughed as she and Mal exchanged the child. As she looked down at the baby with bright eyes, a little sigh escaped her throat. "Well, you can leave her as long as you want. Look at how precious she is." She met Mal's eyes with a bright light. "I'm Claudine Frollo. My dad is Judge Frollo."

"Okay," Mal nodded. "Well, thank you for taking care of her. I promise I'll be back as soon as possible."

Claudine nodded and turned away with tiny Maleficent in her arms, and Mal had to remind herself to slowly step back, turn around and walk out the door. She slipped back outside and shut the door behind her before brushing off her Isle jacket and jumping down the stairs. She hit the streets, turned left, towards the city gates, and stopped when she heard someone calling her name.

"Mal!" Carlos shouted, waving his arm to catch her attention as he, Evie, Jay, and Audrey all walked up. Mal paused on the sidewalk and took in their tight, worried expressions from a distance.

"What is it?" She asked as they drew closer. "Am I needed?"

Carlos shook his head and crossed his arms as he tried to pick out what he had to say. Evie began to wring her hands and more gentle tears streamed down Audrey's face. Only Jay remained indifferent. "About today," He began and stopped.

Mal blinked. Overall, she considered the invasion a vast success. Everyone had been rescued, the ship and bay completely vacated except for the people who had wanted to stay, and she had discovered her new sister and saved her from what was quite likely a horrible childhood. Definitely
not anything she'd soon forget. "We got lots done," She sighed. 'I couldn't have done it without you guys. You too, Audrey. Thanks for sticking with me." She nodded to the Auradon girl, and Audrey abruptly burst into sobs and turned to hide her face. Mal took a half-step back in shock.

"M," Evie said in a hushed tone. "We need to talk about something that happened on the wharf."

Mal listened to the guarded edge in her voice. Bad news; this was bad news. She closed her eyes and put on a bright smile. "Success!" She cheered half-heartedly as she pushed her hands in her pockets. "We have family units starting up and we rescued almost five hundred people so far. I have a team of three people who are willing to watch after misplaced children and the Isle is safeish again." Mal opened her eyes. "Where's Ben?" She asked. "I need a victory kiss."

Evie winced so visibly she almost slipped and fell backward. Mal's smile dropped from her mouth. "Mal..." Jay trailed off. "We actually do have bad news."

Well, there it was. No avoiding it anymore. Mal wiped her hands on her pants and straightened her back. "Okay," She exhaled. "Do you have a death count? Was someone hurt? What is it?"

A deep silence fell across the group. Evie kept her lips sealed and Carlos glanced at Jay. He cleared his throat when it was clear Jay wasn't going to say anything more on the subject. "We ran into Captain Hook, Dr. Facilier, and Gaston."

"When we were separated from you. Audrey ran and Facilier and Gaston chased after her. Just before they snatched her, someone rammed her, and she was knocked out of their path and saved." Carlos exhaled. "It was Ben. Ben was captured by Gaston and Facilier."

Mal blinked at them, feeling as if her world had suddenly been flipped over. "No," She shook her head. "No, he... he fights. He could fight them off." She gave a little laugh as tears filled her eyes. "He's got to be here somewhere." She turned to look around the city.

Audrey stepped forward and put a hand on Mal's shoulder. "He did fight them off. He had Gaston on the ground and everything. But then the place I was hiding... collapsed, and to distract from the noise he threw his sword down and hurled Facilier away, and Gaston picked the sword up before he could get it back."

Mal squeezed her eyes shut as hot, lavalike tears slid down her cheeks and dropped off her chin. Evie, Jay, and Carlos's mouths dropped in surprise. "No!" She wailed. "No, no, no! This is just a bad dream! It's all a bad dream!" Her chest was being pulled apart from the center of her ribcage, like two hooks had been latched, one in the right side and the other in the left, and she was being pulled into two. She tried to take a step and lost her footing, hurling towards the ground until someone caught her in their strong arms. Mal felt all up and down their arms, hoping beyond all hope Ben had suddenly appeared, but all she found was the bulky muscles of Jay as she cried out in absolute anguish.

"By God, Mal!" Jay snapped in surprise. "Pick up your feet!"

Mal leaned into Jay with her arms tight around his neck, trying to remember where her feet even were in all of this pain. Jay shook her a little. "Snap out of it!" He demanded.

"Ben..." Mal moaned, using her fists to wipe at her eyes. "Oh my gosh, how could I have been so stupid? Oh, Ben..." She closed her eyes, balling her nails into the back of his vest as Jay tried to set her back on her feet. She felt like a ragdoll. Her muscles were like goop.

"Let go!" Jay demanded, holding fast onto her shoulders and trying to pry his distraught friend's hand off of him.
Evie put a hand on Jay's shoulder. "Jay." She whispered. "She can't." The blue-haired girl's eyes were filled with tears too. This is what Auradon had reduced their friend to. From a pre-teen with nerves of steel to a young lady who wasn't sure what to do when her other half was gone. The pain in Mal's small frame as her body forced wretched sobs out was palpable.

Jay shook and put his friend down on the floor, where she curled her knees under her and buried her head in her hands, breaking down. "She has to!" He howled, looking like he might punch someone. There were tears in his eyes that he desperately tried to wipe away as he shook. "He's just a stupid boy! Mal never needed a boy before! She's Isle, she doesn't need anyone!"

"Jay," Carlos whispered to his friend. Audrey was backing away as Jay grew angrier and angrier. "He's her other half. She's in love with him."

"No, she's not!" Jay exploded. Tears ran down his face as he balled his fists and screamed. "He's cursed her! He's a lying, scheming-" Jay leaned down and seized Mal's shoulders. "Get up!" He yelled in her face with such force Mal tilted her head back like she thought he might slap her and began to sob even harder. Jay had heard the cries of death, the cries of loss, of hunger and of pain. He had never heard the cries of a breaking heart.

"Jay!" Evie put a hand on his arm and tried to pull him back in surprise. She couldn't believe Jay's unfathomable anger at Mal when she was so clearly in need of help and support.

"Get up! Come on! Get up! Come up!" Jay yelled, repeating the mantra over and over. His hands grew tight on Mal's small arms, and his shoulders began to shake. Once upon a time, she'd been saying this to him, to get him to stop moping and whining about his dad. Once upon a time, she'd been his partner and the person he'd assumed would naturally fit into his future. Once upon a time, he'd been her sword buddy and her protector and her friend, not this other person. "Get up." He croaked. "Get up. Come on. Get up. Come on. Get up. Please, come back to me." His head dropped in defeat.

Jay didn't know what he was feeling. Was this was Auradon called love? All he knew was that he had assumed, naturally, that he and Mal would be partners for life, maybe in more ways than one, and now she had a different partner, and he had nothing and no one. The person they'd jokingly referred to as 'The queen of the Isle' was now literally 'The Queen of the Isle of the Lost'. And she had a different King; one that wasn't him.

He released Mal and pulled her hands from her face. Mal was still pale, and her vibrant green eyes seemed a little duller than before. He remembered those eyes clearly. They were imprinted behind his eyelids. He'd been protecting her from the beginning, back when he was seven and she was three. Jay broke down.

"It's you and I." He begged her. "We rule the Isle. I answer to you, and you're the leader." His voice shook. "It's always been us. Please, Mal." He pushed the hair out of her eyes. "You're my right-hand girl." He begged. "Don't leave me again."

Again, because she'd already left once, and now she was leaving forever in a way he'd be able to see her and know her but she'd never be the same person. Mal dropped her head. Her hands were shaking. Her eyes looked glassy - like she had no idea what to do. Evie was crying softly behind Jay as Carlos carefully put a hand on Jay's shaking shoulder.

This was Mal, who had denounced love at the age of eight and schemed to put Evie to sleep for a hundred years. This was Mal, who had dunked Uma in rotten shrimp larvae. This was Mal, who had been sure her mom had been lying when she'd revealed her plans for Mal to become queen and whose eyes had lit up with fear as the guards had led her away. Evie had had that image of poor,
frightened Mal in her head until the night she saw a figure with wings and horns fly to the top of the wall around the city and look down into the forest. That was the night she'd decided to pack her things and join the city. Now, Mal, strong and stalwart, had no idea what to do with herself. It wasn't fair.

Jay took a deep breath to steady himself and wiped his eyes and nose on his gloves. He took Mal's chin in his hands and wiped the unshed tears from her eyes. "Okay." He whispered. "Okay." It was the whimpers of a broken man.

He looked into his oldest friend's eyes and swallowed. "I don't understand." He whispered. "I don't know if I ever can. But I love you, I'm going to protect you, and I can see you need him." Jay's voice broke on the word 'need', but he pressed on. He squeezed her shoulders so hard his knuckles turned white. "So go get him. You're the queen. You kicked butt as an Islander, and now you kick butt as the most powerful, beautiful queen Auradon, the Moors, and the Isle will ever see. You changed every single person's life on the Isle and in the Moors, and soon Auradon will become a different place because of you. You can do anything you set your mind to. If you want him, then Gaston, Facilier, Hook, and the entire island can't stop you." He patted her arm and pulled her into an upright position. "Go get him." He whispered. The light came back into Mal's eyes.

Mal blinked and moved to wipe tears from her eyes. "Jay." She smiled. "You do have a heart."

"Shocking, huh?" Jay chuckled. He twisted his hands. "Can you forgive me?" He whispered.

"What's there to forgive?" Mal hummed.

Mal leaned forward to wrap her arms around Jay for a hug, but he stopped her, taking her arms and putting them back at her sides. Then quickly, before he could change his mind or before she could stop him, he took Mal's chin in his palm and leaned in. He pressed his lips onto hers. Evie and Audrey let out panicked gasps and Carlos's eyes grew impossibly wide. Mal's eyes grew wide and she froze for a second before she began to push him away. He withdrew immediately, and Mal fell back into the pavement a little, covering her mouth and wiping her lips in a frenzied sort of panic. Jay watched her. "Sorry." He whispered. "I know you're married, but I always told myself you'd be my first kiss." He covered his face to avoid Mal's gape of shock. "I'm not holding onto anything anymore; I know you've got someone else," Jay admitted as he stood up. "I just... needed that." He offered her his hand. "Come on." He said as he helped a stunned Mal to her feet. "Let's go get Prince Useless back."

Mal's face turned bright red. "Prince Useless?" She thundered and shoved him back. "And you needed that? You can't just take something like that from me just because you need it - my mouth isn't a tool you can borrow to fix yourself!"

Jay stared at her softly, nodding along to every word. "I always thought we'd end up together," He confessed. "We were just... the best team, you know?"

"That doesn't excuse anything!" Mal protested. "Do you expect me to just forgive you kissing me when I'm married and you know it?"

"I know you can't be with me." Jay shook his head and refused to meet her gaze. "I won't touch you again." He promised.

"Mal," Evie stepped forward and put a hand on Mal's shoulder, helping her back away from Jay. "What he did wasn't right but you're forgetting that our hearts are breaking too. We all need time."

Mal raised a hand to her lips, covering them and lightly tracing them. "For now," She declared.
"But never again, or our friendship will end with it."

"Queen Mal!" Someone called from the gates, and Mal's head whipped around. People were waving at her for help. Her shoulders slumped as she turned back towards her friends.

"We need swords and maybe a stun gun or two. I doubt Gaston, Facilier, and Hook will be out in the open after all that loss today. Find some full-body armor and a couple more people we can trust out there." Mal commanded. She glanced at Jay with a curled lip and then turned away. "I'm going to help at the gates a little longer, and then it's back to the Isle."

They watched her walk away without a word. Audrey, Carlos, and Evie all shot worried, bewildered glances at Jay, and then slowly split off to hunt down the things they needed. The sun was an hour off of setting though, and Auradon's volunteers were beginning to pack up. Jay had a feeling that Mal's kingdom would need her a little longer than Mal hoped to stay. He watched her cross the border to the outside and authorize two more people to hand out cards, and couldn't help thinking that Ben was so lucky that she loved him and wanted him. Ben got everything she had to give, and Jay would just have to be happy to be one of her close friends. Still, he didn't regret that one robbery kiss, her lips pressed tight against his, as warm and full as he'd ever imagined before.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, 101 Dalmanations, The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Alice in Wonderland, Frozen, Tarzan, Peter Pan, The Princess and the Frog, Cinderella, or Hercules.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Ben is scorned by the villains. Mal meets her dad and Evie meets her brother. Mal journeys to battle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's quite remarkable how easily the royals trust, really." The Evil Queen crooned as she sat rigid a few feet from him, filing her nails. "If Maleficent's spawn hadn't completely forgone the option of being worth anything to her mother, she could have easily taken control of the entire kingdom."

"Well, hopefully, they had some fun on their stint of ruling the world together." Captain Hook snorted, shaking his head. "My, how the mighty fall. We all swore that girl would be something when she left. We thought she might actually do it. Pity, she was so weak."

Ben twisted his hands in his bonds, listening to them speak and biting his tongue. In a class that he'd taken years ago, they'd advised people to tape blades or lockpicks to their skin using band-aids when going into dangerous situations. Ben wished he'd listened. Then he might have been able to slip away when the conversations turned to fights. Instead, he was left bound to the post. Harry Hook, the son of Captain Hook, had been put in charge of guarding him. The teenage boy was mostly facing the conversations, however. Not that it mattered. The ropes binding Ben's wrists were so tight he couldn't possibly wrench free.

A hand passed over his cheek in a somewhat gentle caress, and he turned away. "What do you think, Beast Boy?" Maleficent chortled. "Quite the failure, that girl of mine?"

Ben didn't turn to meet her eyes as the shadows from the fire they'd lit on the docks made the shadow from Maleficent's horns flicker over his eyes. Fires, he was learning, were dangerous on the Isle. Some parts of the air, especially in this early summer, were flammable. Already, the fire had spouted twice, catching the gangplank aflame as random clouds floated around the water in the cooling night. The pirates seemed to think the worth outweighed the risk, but Ben wasn't so sure. For one, the light the flames provided was little, if none, and for two, if the fire caught on the ship he'd surely be left to burn alive. He was only bait, meaning that he was somewhat expendable. Sure, Mal would burn the wharf down and possibly carry out the execution threats she'd been tossing back and forth for a few months, but he'd still be dead.

"How does it feel to be a king now?" Harry, who was the son of Captain Hook, crowed. He traced Ben's face with a finger in a very weird, very intense motion. And, Ben had to admit, being king was not too appealing right now.

"You'd better hope your girlfriend shows up soon," A girl who he'd learned was named Uma chortled at him from her post at the gangplank, where she was sharpening a long sword in the dark. There was no moon, only the feel of the steel and the occasional reflection of the fire on the wharf. Uma confused him because she was only a teenager, yet Maleficent regarded her as either a second-in-command or a partner. The only reason he'd been able to pick up on was that they both had a mutual disregard for Mal.
"She's not my girlfriend," Ben shrugged, twisting his hands to try and stretch his sore arms. He'd been tied for a few hours, ever since the AK's and Mal's crew had deserted the ship. Ben hadn't seen them, but he'd heard Gaston complaining about the great loss the villains had suffered. He balled his fist up and ran a finger over the warm metal on his finger. "We married. But, you already knew that."

"That sneaky little witch." Uma hissed, sheathing her sword so violently Ben glanced her way and caught a peek of Maleficent's bright, stormy green eyes. "Who grabbed everything she wanted and left us nothing."

"Who turned her back on evil." Harry Hook joined in in her monologuing. He leaned in close to Ben, and Ben could smell something literally fishy on his breath. Harry, he knew, had a thing with Uma. However, he certainly seemed to do a lot of flirting around. Even with the enemy.

"Who said you weren't big or bad enough to be in her gang." A third pirate, one whose voice he didn't know, added in. Harry and Uma turned in the darkness to stare at him incredulously. However, the third person didn't quite seem to get the point. "You know, she called you shrimpy and ducked you into the-"

"Enough." Maleficent crooned, running a fingertip down Ben's cheek. Ben leaned back as she examined him. "At least she has a small excuse. You are cute. I mean, how could you not be, with King Adam for a father! Ah, that man. In another time, in another time." Ben's stomach turned a little. Maleficent sat down in a throne-like chair that had been set out on the deck for her to mock Ben from. It was intricately detailed, but he couldn't tell much in the darkness. "Still, you'd think she'd remember her own people, her family before running off with the prince. And really, I would have given you to her if she wanted you. She, on the other hand, gives us nothing."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but there's kind of a massive city being built about five miles that way." Ben nodded his head towards the utopia. "And she has made changes. I'm sure you noticed you're getting better food and clothing and-"

"And freedom." Maleficent scoffed. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but we're still trapped here while she goes around Auradon, visiting my old homeland and spelling anything she pleases."

Ben didn't quite see the point of arguing with Maleficent. Mal had only visited two places in Auradon - Auradon City and San Fransokyo. And of those two cities, only a handful of places in all. And as for spelling things... she couldn't exactly use her magic too much without people sending her shifty glances. He turned away as Harry Hook leaned in closer, laughing quietly.

"She didn't even come for her friends." Maleficent sniffed, brushing her eyebrow with a finger. "Selfish girl, really."

"Isn't that how you raised her?" Ben furrowed his brow in confusion. "I mean, obviously it didn't work, but okay." He sighed. "And you realize... the barrier to Auradon is sealed. She can't bring anyone over without my permission. I mean, sure, she could have released the barrier here, but none of you would have been able to get to Auradon." The fire popped in the distance. Ben could feel Maleficent's glare on him, though he was avoiding her eerie green gaze. Magic was a much bigger turn-on when it was Mal performing it, not her mother.

Technically, this woman was Ben's mother-in-law. That was a strange concept to grasp. He felt like, after this situation, he was allowed to make a few jokes about how horrid his wife's mom was. A grin came to his face as a really funny one came to mind. Slowly, he twisted his ring around and exhaled. Maleficent got to her feet. "It's ridiculous how like her father she is. Dramatic. Delusional. Easily distracted by flashy things."
Ben didn't say anything. He did wonder, though, what all of this said about Maleficent for actually creating her child with this man she apparently hated so vehemently. "She can't tell the breaking of a spell from the making of a spell." Maleficent scoffed. " Foolish, simple-minded imbecile."

"Well, we actually know a lot about spells after this ordeal." Ben hummed. "Her more than I do. She actually understood what Fairy Godmother was saying when she explained the broken curse."

The air stilled. Maleficent's eyes grew dim and then flashed so violently Ben could see his shoes against the deck. "Broken?" Maleficent demanded. "My spell, broken?"

Ben could only shrug. Maleficent seized his chin, looking outraged. "Then it's true that you've been controlling her in the palace? How did you manage to bypass my work?"

Something told Ben there must have been something somewhere in the spell's code that prevented the palace from not giving Mal too much power. He doubted, though, that the same restrictions applied to Mal not taking power they offered her. He shook his head. "I don't control her." He told Maleficent. "She kind of does her own thing and I just hope she comes back."

"You must be doing something." Maleficent hissed. "My daughter wouldn't stay with... a pawn!"

Ben twisted his chin out of Maleficent's grasp and clenched his fingers tightly around his wedding ring. "I guess that explains why she didn't come back for you." He replied.

The third pirate who'd attempted to join in on Harry and Uma's trash-talking gasped. "Oh!" He exclaimed. "That's a really, really good one. It's almost like that time Mal called Harry 'Mr. Coathanger' because the hook makes him look like a-"


"You know, we're not all that different here." He began. "Uma, Maleficent, you're leaders. You're all each other's friends. You could choose to be good. You could choose to take Mal's offer to live in the city. Just give up your bitterness, and-"

"It's your way or the highway!" Maleficent cackled. "Take up your route or stay locked away. Hmm. You can take my wings and my freedom and my daughter, but you can't take my head." Maleficent began to laugh, hard, descending into a mad fit and collapsing on the boat deck, coughing and choking as she laughed. Ben had heard his wife describe her mom's laughing fits, but he couldn't say he'd tried too hard to imagine them.

"Maleficent." He whispered. Mal's deranged mother looked up at him, head tilted to the side, and for a brief second Ben saw his wife smiling sweetly down at him from the trees at the castle, with snow falling all around them. He swallowed. "If you choose good, you could be part of her life again. Maybe you'll never get your wings or your scepter back from the museum, but you could talk to her. You could watch her grow. Mal and I - you could get to know us both. Mal's only going to be a teenager for a few more short years and then that phase of her life will be over and she'll be a young woman who's running two kingdoms. Don't you want to be part of your daughter's life?"

"Don't you want to be part of your daughter's life?" Maleficent mimicking in a high-pitched, chirping tone. "I am, and will always be a part of her life, prncey. No matter how far she goes, she's never going to get rid of me. How long will you last? And while we're on the subject, she's still got a year until she's of age in Auradon. How does it feel, to be robbing the cradle?"

That was a low, low blow. Ben balled his fists up and exhaled. Harry Hook and Uma laughed to see how much it irked him. He met Maleficent's eyes. "The difference between you and I is
simple." He began. "Both of us may be part of her life, but only one of us she loves. The other is nothing but a bad memory. Stuck in the past."

Maleficent flinched back, looking absolutely devastated by his words. It occurred to Ben that he may have gone a bit far as Maleficent's hands shook and as she stared at him incredulously. Glossy green tears appeared in her luminescent eyes. "One of us," She hissed, "One of us made her who she is."

Ben let out a breath through his nose. "And the other one of us gave her the choice of what she wanted to become."

Maleficent slapped him. Hard across his cheek and his nose. He felt a tiny stream of blood begin to trickle out of his right nostril. "You are nothing but a pawn!" Maleficent hissed. "A temporary fixation in her life. The moment I have my powers back, I will burn you off the face of this planet and make her see sense!"

She wouldn't be able to. Ben knew that. He steadied his breathing. "You could come back. You could apologize for betraying her and set things straight. You could watch her change people's lives. And down the road, you could see your grandchildren and—"

A solid punch in the nose stopped him from speaking. As Maleficent drew back her hand, she spun around and picked up the chair she'd been sitting in and hurled it at him. His stomach armor took most of the blow, but his breath still caught as the back of the chair slammed into his chest. He gasped for air as Maleficent spent a few seconds heavy breathing. It was time, he decided, to keep his mouth shut.

"You'll never touch my daughter again," Maleficent hissed. Green tears were still brimming in her eyes, reminding him of Mal when her hands were balling into fists of fury. "Not without her permission, not with her permission, not in the life of day or the death of dark. Or so help me, King Benjamin, you will die in the slowest, most painful way I can dream up."

The mistress of all evil, his mother-in-law, turned and strode across the gangplank. Those who had been lounging by the fire were silent in the wake of the argument. All was still. Ben felt out the engraving in his ring with a little breath. Please, please hurry Mal, he thought. I don't know how much longer your mom will hold out on me.

Rather than taking the recruits and alerting them to the fact their King was being held captive, thus creating mass panic and a sense of failure in the Auradonians, Mal took a small task force that consisted of her most trusted allies. Jay, Carlos, Evie, Lonnie, Audrey, and the small boy from the Isle who had been with her and Audrey the first time going in. By the time they'd gotten everyone ready and plotted to go in, the sun was beginning to set. They put their plans off until daylight and turned in for a restless sleep.

Jay, Evie, and Carlos waved goodbye to all of the recruits as they unknowingly congratulated each other on a great day and left to return to Auradon for the night. By day's end, the only Auradonians left were those with Mal.

Audrey stayed the night in an apartment on the highest floor. It wasn't anything fancy, but she was amazed at how quiet everything got at night and how easy it was to feel at home in the small space. She sat beside the window and watched children practice light magic down below as street lamps and inside lights flickered out, and she felt peace within her soul. Her phone laid forgotten beside her as she watched more stars appear above her than she'd ever seen before in her life in the sky above. It was a mosaic of lights and pinpricks that took her breath away. She'd never found
beauty like that in any of her dresses. She'd never found comfort like this in any of her things at the palace. She'd never known herself like she had when Mal had praised her. 'Ben will be so proud.' She'd said.

There was an odd sort of sentiment there. Mal knew she'd come to impress Ben and, hopefully, steal him back, but when the time came, she still congratulated her in his name. It meant a lot to her, but the real prize of the day was knowing she had taken on an actual pirate sword fighter and saved the queen's life. No one had told her to do it. She hadn't thought she'd be able to succeed, but in the end, the battle had resulted in a flat-out victory and she hadn't even been hurt. Audrey curled her legs up to her chest as she replayed the look on Uma's face when she'd slid in with her sword in defense of the woman who had stolen her boyfriend, and a small smile slid onto her face.

In Jay's apartment on the first floor, he was looking out and watching the Isle children exchange glowing rocks and focus on levitating them as high as they could in a childish sport. The ghostly feeling of Mal's lips was resting on his mouth and sending him into a stupor. As he watched as their moms and older siblings call the kids inside, he failed to notice a shadow watch him watching until Lonnie walked up to his window.

She waved. He waved back. She smiled and he saluted her. She pressed her mouth against the glass and made a fish face. He laughed and mirrored her. She disappeared from view, and a few seconds later there was a knock at his door. He and she stayed up until the wee hours of the morning talking about everything under the stars. And Jay had to admit, it was nice to know a girl who was just as tough, if not tougher than he was. At least Auradon hadn't failed her.

And, on a quieter plane of emotion, talking to her made everything he'd once imagined about him and Mal seem... dimmer. She made it easier to focus on the now, and not the past. He began to forget how, once upon a time, he'd been Mal's only friend. Once upon a time, it had been them against the world. He'd fought for her life and she'd fought for his, and he had watched as, wherever she went, she pulled people together behind her. She'd done it with him, then Evie and Carlos, and then the Isle, and now with Auradon. Jay began to let go of the thoughts that he'd once had - that True Love didn't exist outside of Auradon, so he might as well stay partners with Mal, and maybe one day they would kiss, make meaningless love with each other, and there would be children to take up their mantle of ruling when he and Mal died - all because they were partners. Jay had known - been completely sure - that he would never have the chance to fall into true love. It just wouldn't happen.

But now here he was, alone with Evie and Carlos slipping away to school. And Mal was starstruck - completely devoted to Ben, and she was in that kind of love Jay had known was impossible to find on the Isle. Therefore, she would stay with Ben, and the love they would have would actually mean something to the both of them, and the love Jay had once figured would eventually happen was now just a dream, and he still had no idea what he wanted to do. So for now, he tried to forget the disappointment that Mal wasn't going to leave the palace. He tried to forget the feeling of Evie and Carlos slowly leaving him behind. He focused on Lonnie's clear, cool speech, and tried to ignore the fiery past and the ever-foreboding future.

Mal lay alone in her room, shivering in the dark and shaking a little. She'd chewed one lock of her hair at an odd angle shorter than the rest and bitten her nails down to her nail beds and she was still shaking in agony as her head filled with horrible images. What if they were hurting him? Ben's sword lay glinting in the corner for the morning, reminding her of every time he'd fought with her and ripping her heart in two because now she had to go fight for him.

Two soft knocks echoed at the door and Mal forced herself to her hands and knees before pressing her feet into the floor and striding across the room. Her sheets were a twisted mess. Everything was
deadly silent except for the distant sounds of people still checking new citizens into the Isle. Mal wished she were there to help them, but her magic had become exhausted and Evie, Jay, and Carlos had hauled her away in the hopes she could steal a few precious hours of sleep. It had been past midnight when she'd been left here. She wondered who was calling on her.

Mal turned the lock and opened the door and felt her body become a bit stiff at the sight of the person on the other side of the door. They had turned away as if they had assumed her asleep, and looked amazed by her appearance. Slowly, they - he - cleared his throat. "Quite the show you put on yesterday,"

Hades. Mal swallowed, examining the tall blue hair and the tell-tale features she knew despite never having gotten a good look at the older man. She couldn't believe he was here. He must have been allowed in. He must have passed her regulations. She swallowed to clear the frog in her throat. Still, her voice came out sounding dry. "You know, I don't think I've ever looked at you face-to-face. Only glimpses."

"Can't imagine why," Hades whispered, turning to face her and putting his hands into his pockets. "You've grown up since I last saw you."

"Since I was what, five?" Mal snarked, raising an eyebrow.

Hades shook his head. "Show me some respect, kid. No, I think you were fourteen."

Fourteen. Fourteen had been years ago. Fourteen had been before Ben and the Isle and everything. She'd been young at fourteen. Mal brushed her messy, damaged hair away from her face. "Wow, should I be proud?" She snarked.

"I was just coming to see you," Hades explained, gesturing at the door.

"And at this hour, no less," Mal nodded. "I can't imagine why. Is it because I'm queen now? Suddenly worth your time?"

Hades examined her. His gaze felt like ice creeping down her spine. She watched his expression pass over different emotions like he wasn't even sure what he was feeling. "Can I come in?" He whispered.

Part of Mal wanted to shut the door in his face and lock him out. But really, she was alone, and being alone was lonely when it felt like this. It wasn't like she was going to sleep. She propped the door open with a foot. "Sure, I guess. It's not like I'm expecting anyone else before sunrise hours."

Hades stepped past her and sat down on a chair beside the door. Mal shut the door cautiously and watched him examine the room - her bed by the window with its ball of covers and all her possessions spread beside the wall. "You're alone?" He asked with a confused frown. "Where's Prince Charming?"

Prince Charming. Prince Useless. The titles were so similar that Mal felt indescribable rage spike up towards both the blue-haired god and her old best friend.

"Gone," She replied with a snort.

"He go back to Auradon without you?" Hades asked, raising an eyebrow. "Why are you splitting up?"

"No," Mal shook her head and twisted her hands. "He's...out. My crew and I are going to go and save him tomorrow."

Mal said nothing as she returned to sit on her bed and picked nonchalantly at the covers, trying to untangle them. Hades watched her, and then tried again to get her to talk. "Is Auradon treating you right?"

Mal picked a thread off a blanket with a snap and shrugged. "I don't really interact with Auradon much outside of my blog," She replied.

"Oh," Hades nodded as if he'd already known this. He crossed his arms and leaned his chair back into the wall. "So, who's bright idea was it to marry you at sixteen?"

"Not Belle or Adam's, if that's what you're asking," Mal snorted. "The person in question is an emotional lunatic and generally not the easiest person to get along with."

"Ah, see, we have something in common already," Hades laughed with his hair lighting up a bit. "We both hate your mother."

"I don't hate mom," Mal denied, giving up on the mess of blankets and simply sitting straight with her head dipped to the flooring as she thought.

"How could you not hate her?" Hades asked with a sneer, balling his fists up a little.

Mal squeezed her eyes shut. She should have anticipated this, coming to the Isle and opening it up and everything. She should have planned ahead and felt a little foolish since she hadn't. "At least she stuck around," She mumbled in a low hiss. Because Hades hadn't stuck around. Hades had left.

"Oh, Mal, don't be bitter," Hades rolled his eyes a little.

Mal pushed herself up, squeezing her eyes shut. She didn't have the nerves to deal with this. First Ben, gone, and now Hades, her father, here. "Why would you care?" She spat as she got up to go pick up Ben's sword. "Her plan... gets you off the Isle either way." She gestured to his presence for proof he hadn't asked for. "Did you know?"

"Know?" Hades scoffed and looked towards the ceiling. "That she was going to sell you out to Auradon in possibly the most bitter, heartless way? Sending you to a prince who had already turned five by the time you were born? Do you think I would have ever slept with her if I'd known what she was going to do with you?"

"Keep talking like that and people might think you actually care," Mal rolled her eyes, examining Ben's name on the leather handle. "You make it sound like I was planned."

"You had a curse on you, tying you as a literal failsafe to the throne," Hades pointed out with a deadpan expression. "Do you really think she wasn't planning on getting pregnant?" He shook his head and closed his eyes with the air of a man who was regretting many different things all at once.

"And you?" Mal asked, furrowing her brow. "What's your excuse?"

Hades looked back to the ground and nodded, looking like he had a lump stuck in his throat. "I don't have one," He admitted. "I wish we'd been closer when you were growing up so that I could have protected you or at least been a parent to you. I'm sorry."

"Oh, boo hoo!" Mal snapped, face twisting up as she squeezed the handle of Ben's sword and scowled. "Wake up and smell the stink! It's all over now, and you weren't there. You abandoned me and left me with an insane woman." She exhaled, closed her eyes, and let the sword swing in
her hands a little. "Sixteen years of nothing," She whispered. "And then one year with everything I could ever want at my fingertips and it might all be ruined tomorrow." She sat back down, putting the blade to the floor and leaning over the sword a little like she was in pain.

Hades watched her. "That his?" He asked.

"You can't have it," Mal scowled. If anything, it was hers after his.

"It's nice," He rolled his eyes. "Did he ever use it?"

Mal hesitated, staring at the ground. Her hands felt a little numb. "Yeah," She agreed. "He was the most talented person I've ever seen with a sword."

"And he still got captured?" Hades asked, raising an eyebrow. At the verb, Mal felt a twang in her chest that felt a little like one of her heartstrings had snapped. She looked away and focused on the wall.

"He had Gaston pinned and then put his sword down to throw Facilier," Mal repeated Audrey's words, trying to pretend it was someone other than Ben to keep from breaking down. "I've never been able to beat him without magic."

"Yeah, I saw that interview," Hades chuckled, pulling his leg up onto his knee. Mal paused, pondering his words, and then looked back up with a furrowed brow.

"Do you... keep up with my interviews?" She asked, scrunching her mouth and eyebrows together.

"Only watched day and night for the month after you left, waiting to see if the palace would talk about you at all," Hades admitted. "And after they announced you, I just left the TV on so I could catch all the gossip. I only turned it off when I was sure they wouldn't be saying anything. I would have tried to keep them from taking you - hidden you if I could've - but, uh, I didn't catch the gossip until two days after they'd taken you. Too late..." Hades trailed off, sounding regretful, and Mal stared at him. She imagined hiding from the guards as they searched for her, desperate to find a way to break or nullify the curse.

"I had no idea," She mumbled, picturing Ben and then Hades.

"No, really?" Hades snorted, rolling his eyes. Mal turned to stare at him as he dropped his leg back onto the floor, casting shadows across the floor.

"Thank you?" She mumbled, unsure of what to say.

"For what, being a lousy dad?" Hades snorted. "I wish I could make it up to you, but it sounds like you made it on your own, no thanks to me or your mom."

"I did what I had to do," Mal shrugged. There wasn't much else to say. She forced herself to prop the sword against the wall and closed her eyes. Hades got to his feet.

"And now?" He whispered, putting his hands back into his pockets and stepping towards the window a little.


Hades made a sound of agreement in the back of his throat and sighed. "That's my girl," He whispered.
There were seventeen years of nothing between them. Seventeen years of living in the worst place
on earth with the craziest person alive. Mal had no idea how she felt like he'd been around the last
four years when he'd only been here for fifteen minutes. It was somewhat comforting to have her
dad around, talking to her, in the same room, but it was. She listened to him take a few steps and
could feel his hesitation when he stopped a few steps from her. She swallowed. "I'd like you to
meet him," She told him.

"Prince Charming?" Hades asked, sounding a little dumbfounded.

"His name is Ben," Mal rolled her eyes. "At least your nickname is better than Jay's. And yeah, he
should meet at least one of my parents."

"Chances are he's probably met the other one by now," Hades pointed out. "I'm not sure he'd like to
meet me. Does he even know about me?"

"He loves anything to do with the Isle and almost everything to do with me," Mal hummed. "He'd
probably be thrilled. And no, he doesn't know, but we could change that."

Hades snorted. "Well, hopefully, I'll see you around the city, putting people to work, so maybe I'll
meet him anyways. Should I pull up the dead and threaten him a little?"

Mal laughed, putting her head up a little more as tears prickled her eyes. She could see, quite
clearly, what Ben's expression would be and it made her sad to imagine him. "Only a little," She
sniffed as she wiped her eyes and made her shoulders stiff so they wouldn't shake. She'd thought
she had no more tears left to cry, but evidently, it was not so.

Hades walked to her side, bumped her arm with his hip, and put a hand on her shoulder. "You
going to be okay?" He whispered.

Mal shrugged. "It all depends on tomorrow," She sighed.

Hades cleared his throat and she glanced up to watch his brow furrow a little. "You really okay
with... everything?" He asked. "The situation and the guy and-"

"Dad," Mal cut him off and watched his face contort in shock. "I love him."

Hades took his hands away and exhaled. "Okay, okay," He exhaled. "Just... don't forget your old
man." He took a few steps away and headed for the door.

Mal watched him twist the knob. He was here, he'd seen her, and it seemed that they'd reconciled
without any real explanation at all. She slowly got to her feet and swallowed. "I'm going to have to
miss you all over again," she called as he took a step out. He paused, turning a little over his
shoulder, and stared at her. Mal twisted her hands but couldn't find anything else to say. The stage
of her life where she really needed a dad was over, and they both knew that.

Hades shrugged and glanced around at the new building, the new rooms, and everything else
surrounding him. "Thanks for a glimpse of the sun."

The sun. The sun was coming up outside. She could see the sky lightening. The night was gone,
and she hadn't slept a wink. Hades stepped outside and, with a last look, closed the door. Mal sat
back down with a sigh and closed her eyes. 'I'm on my way,' she promised Ben. 'Just hang in there.

The sun rose and began to turn the water pretty colors and to bake the sands. Evie slipped out and
locked her door behind her. She walked down the stairs to the first floor and found a dark-haired,
handsome man walking around. He had an angular face, the darkest pair of blue eyes she had ever
seen, and perfect white teeth that were chewing on his lip as he wandered around, looking lost. He held a piece of paper in his hands and this he glanced to every few seconds as he walked. "Excuse me." He stopped her and held out the paper. "I'm looking for room fifty-one. Can you help me?"

Evie blinked at him. A beautiful rosy color had erupted in his bottom lip. "I just came from fifty-one." She responded, glancing over his stylish outfit and letting her eyes hover on a few talismans around his neck.

The boy jumped back. "Oh!" He exclaimed, blue eyes blinking as he tried to act cool. "Oh, okay, well..." He cleared his throat and tucked the paper into his pocket, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops as he did. "I wasn't expecting this." He whispered, taking a moment to nervously scratch the back of his head in a way that made his dark hair catch the light attractively. "You see, ahem..."

"If you're asking for a date, now isn't a good time, sorry." Evie held up a hand, effectively cutting him off. The poor boy's mouth dropped open in surprise. "I have to leave to find the queen." Evie continued. She began to slide around him.

"No, no!" The boy stopped her, waving his hands and looking embarrassed. "See, I'm Evan, and, ahem, my mom is the Evil Queen too!" He spread his hands as if to present himself to her. Evie stopped and blinked as Evan began to wring his hands. "She gave me up because she was a little more into girl children, you know? But I'm your older brother! I wanted to meet you and, um..." He trailed off, looking extremely awkward, if still cute.

Evie stared. "My... brother?" She asked suspiciously. Her eyes once again flickered to his physical features. Brown hair though he had, it seemed to give off a blue tint. He had, she suddenly noticed, a lot of the same features she did. His eyes were the same shape and the same deep-set, their noses and mouths were identical, and they stood at equal heights with each other. It was like she was looking in a gender-inverted mirror. And, she had to admit, they both looked really, really good.

"Yeah!" Evan nodded. He was admiring her just as much as she was him, though his eyes clung to her hair most of all. "And, by the way, our dad – we have the same dad – he was an apple dryad that supported Maleficent during the War of Villainy when we were imprisoned on the Isle. I'm as old as the Isle itself. Gaston killed him before you were born."

That news distracted Evie from memorizing her brother's face. She stared at him, searching for any sort of a lie, and the truth hit her like Evan had thrown a rock at her heart. She swallowed. "Oh." She said.

"His name was Ergog if you want to know." Evan supplied. "He was our name-base. Everyone thinks it's off of the 'Evil' in 'Evil Queen', but Mom's name was actually Grimhilde."

"Wow," Evie whispered. "Thank you for telling me. I always wondered what my parentage was."

"No problem." Evan nodded. "I've got a good memory for these things. I'm really fascinated with biology - specifically pedigrees and heritage. I know about 80% of all the Isle kid's parents."

"Wait." Evie furrowed her brow. "For real?"

"Yeah." Evan shrugged. "Like your friend Jay, for example, his mom was a murderess who lured men to their deaths in Auradon using her charm. She's dead now because she tried her old trick with Gaston and, well, you probably know Gaston's reputation."

Hearing Gaston's name again reminded Evie she needed to find Mal, but her curiosity had been piqued. "What about Mal? Or Carlos?" She asked.
"Carlos is a son of a tycoon Cruella worked closely with while she was in Auradon. He may be alive, but definitely on the bad part of the Isle. He and Cruella had a split when she had the baby. I don't know who Mal's dad is. I know for sure that the new Maleficent kid, Malice, was fathered by Jafar." Evan explained.

Evie blinked in shock. "Jafar?" She sputtered as he head filled once again with memories of Jay - Jafar's son - kissing Mal - Maleficent's daughter. She almost wanted to be sick. "Maleficent let Jafar father a kid with her?"

"Yeah." Evan nodded, looking slightly uneasy as well. "She's been a little tipsy since Auradon pulled her first daughter off. Anyway." He exhaled. "Anyone else you're interested in?"

"Well…” Evie trailed off. A million questions surfaced inside her head. "I don't mean to pick your brain, but I've always wondered about Uma since her mom is an octopus." Evie put her hands together and fluttered her fingers.

"Cecelia." Evan corrected. "And it's fine. Most people don't care to talk about their parents. Anyway, Uma is a special case. Care for a guess?" He leveled a thin, attractive eyebrow at Evie.

"I don't know." Evie shrugged.

"Triton," Evan revealed. Evie's mouth dropped open. "King Triton still has power over the oceans. He can move freely in and out of the barrier. I'm not privy to details – nor do I want to be – but I'd be willing to guess they had a kid the way mermaids and most other sea creatures have kids."

"But Uma has legs." Evie furrowed her brow as her head began to spin even faster.

"She was born with a lung disorder. She couldn't breathe underwater. When Triton heard, he used the same magic he used on Ariel to give Uma legs." Evan shrugged.

"Through the barrier?" Evie asked.

"Magical items and spells usually work through the barrier for a short amount of time. I expect Ursula just held Uma a little close to the barrier until the spell took effect." Evan explained. He moved his hands as he talked.

"How do you know all this?" Evie asked.

Evan blushed scarlet. "Ah, due to mom, I'm pretty good at seducing people. Or just getting them to talk. Either way."

"You seduced Ursula?" Evie asked with wide eyes.

"No, no!" Evan flushed. "Just, er, Captain Hook." He picked up one of the talismans around his neck and showed Evie. It had the shape of a sword. "He gave me this as a form of protection."

"Captain Hook?" Evie's eyes grew even wider.

"You don't have to yell it out loud." Evan winced at the volume of her voice. "Yeah. I guess I'm just… unnaturally interested in pedigrees and phenotypes and Human Biology."

"Unnaturally is correct." Evie chuckled. "What about Maleficent? How did you figure that out? I didn't even know she was pregnant and suddenly she had a second kid."

"I heard that through the grapevine!" Evan said with his face completely red.
"What grapevine? Was it Jafar?" Evie began to twist the hem of her jacket as horrible images began to beat her brain full-force.

"It was not." Evan folded his arms and scowled. "And frankly, you're making this out to be a lot more than it is. Usually, it's an eye bat and some kissing and they tell me what I want to know and I leave."

"Usually?" Evie smirked.

"You shut up." Evan glared at her. "For the record, I did it at first to keep alive after Mom threw me out. And you're benefiting from my wealth of knowledge anyway, so you shouldn't judge."

Evie laughed. "That is beyond unbelievable. And you just remember all of this?" Evan nodded. "Wow," Evie said. "That's incredible." She cocked her head. "I wonder if Mal would be interested in you writing it all down, so she can go around and fill people in?"

Evan's eyes lit up. "That'd be cool." He nodded. "But I'd prefer if my methods didn't leave this conversation." He sent her a judging look.

"Aw." Evie pouted as the humor of the situation began to crash down on her. "Are you sure I can't tell Mal you made out with the villain who kidnapped her boyfriend?" With sudden realization, Evie slapped her hand over her mouth.

There was a long pause as Evan processed what she'd said and considered his response. Evan held up two long, clean fingers. "One, husband. Mal is married. Two, what the crap?" He opened his mouth to say more but apparently could not find the words.

Evie hung her head in shame. "I'm actually going to meet up with Mal now." She admitted. "She's probably waiting for me." She paused. "You didn't deny the making-out charge."

"So you can go rescue him?" Evan asked, ignoring her question.

"Yeah." Evie nodded. "It was super fun to meet you, and I really want to catch up and see where you've been all my life, but she's counting on my now." Evie began to back away.

"That's cool." Evan smiled. "I'm, uh, the first room in the third building, okay?" He pointed in the direction for her with a bright, blinding smile.

"Okay." Evie smiled. She turned and hurried away, down to the gate where Audrey, Mal, their friend, Jay, and Lonnie already were. Mal looked like she'd risen from the dead and Evie couldn't help scornfully thinking it was because Ben hadn't been there to put her out of her misery.

"Morning," Audrey said as Evie approached. She, unlike Mal, was wide-awake and seemed to have a new, unwavering energy about her. She shifted her weight from foot to foot and kept a hand curled on her sword like she was actually anxious to use it again.

"Good morning," Evie said. "Where's Carlos?"

"Right there." Mal pointed behind Evie. "Running late again." Evie turned around to see Carlos sprinting across the square as Islanders weaved around him, pulling his jacket around his shoulders.

"Ready." Carlos gasped as he caught up to them.

"That's not what I call 'ready'." Mal scoffed. A large, thick bag of swords was slung over her
shoulder. A stun gun was strapped to everyone's hips except for Evie and Carlos. Mal tossed them one each.

Without much drama or small-talk, they all slipped outside the border and began to make the trek back to the wharf. Now that they knew the way, it didn't take them as long. Only about forty minutes.

Everyone was awake again except for Ursula. Most of the villain kids appeared to have deserted, and only Uma, Harry Hook, and Gil, who was the son of Gaston, remained. Not only were they awake, but they were also raving mad.

Ben was on deck with a red mark across his cheek as his head hung down with his chin hitting his chest. Mal clenched her hands so that her nails dug into her palms. Her stomach was churning and every muscle felt as strong and unyielding as a bar of metal.

Carlos put a hand on her shoulder. "Chill." He told her. "We'll get him back."

Mal nodded and swallowed. "I'll do the talking since I'm the only one who can use magic. God, look at how many villains. It looks like we're outnumbered one to fifty." She pointed down to the ship, shaking her head.

"You got a strategy?" Lonnie asked, furrowing her brow.

"Follow me." Mal nodded, though she wasn't quite sure what she'd be doing yet. They distributed the swords and Mal began the long walk down to the gangplank. Gil was the first person to see her.

"Hey, guys!" He yelled down to his comrades below from the lookout post. "Look who's returned!" Ben lifted his head and straightened his back when he saw her. Her heart thudded against her chest. He looked tired, but not badly hurt.

Harry Hook leaped up to stand on the gangplank as Mal's task force headed down to the ship. "Welcome!" He announced in a loud voice and paused to spit a mouthful of blood into the sea. A large bruise had formed around his jaw.

"Finally!" Uma screeched as she did a small pirate's jig watching the group approach. Mal planted her feet on the first part of the gangplank and watched as the villains untied Ben and hauled him to a walking plank. Out of reach, but not out of sight.

Maleficent cackled and walked beside Uma to the point where the gangplank connected to the boat. Mal met her mother's eyes.

"Let's get this party started!" Uma shouted. She raised her arms above her head as her new crew – the villains – cheered. Mal crossed her arms. As the cheering died down, Uma leaned toward Mal and whispered. "Let's see who's the more cold-hearted, yeah?"

"Yeah, skip the drama." Mal glared. "I want the king back. Now." She could feel her eyes smolder as she glanced over Uma's shoulder to Ben.

Uma smiled. "You know I've dreamed of this moment? You wanting something from me, and me watching you squirm like a worm on a hook."

Mal tilted her head. "I'm so flattered you dream about me. I haven't given you a thought since I left."

"A nice sentiment, if it were true." Uma scoffed. "I saw what you said on TV." She took a seat on
the ship's railing and pulled a sword out of a barrel and a whetstone out of her pocket.

Mal watched her for a few seconds and then said: "Spit it out. You'd have killed him already if you wanted to make me mad. So, if you want your deal, you might as well set your conditions now."

"Otherwise?" Uma asked.

"Otherwise I'll be forced to sway my hand." Mal shrugged. The villains laughed.

"Your daughter talks a talk," Jafar told Maleficent.

Maleficent cackled. "For a wench who couldn't even overthrow a monarchy properly." She agreed. Mal ignored them, though her hands started to shake a little. Uma smirked at Mal.

"Let's put it this way," Uma said, dropping the sword back into the barrel with a thunk. "It's the wand. She held a hand aloft. "For the crown." She put her other hand up and held them even, like the two sides of a scale. "We want Fairy Godmother's wand. Bring it, and maybe we'll let him go with... minor scratches."

"Unharmed." Mal objected. "From here on out, every scratch you put on him I'll rain back on you."

Mal's eyes lit up as she spoke. "Tenfold." She said to clarify.

Uma laughed. Mal cocked her head as the teal-haired girl looked around to her mates like she couldn't believe what Mal had said. "What if I refuse, and demand him back now?" Mal asked curiously.

Uma cracked all of her knuckles by flexing them. "If you refuse, I'll throw him overboard and let him swim with killer sharks. But not before I hang him over to the likes of Gaston and Gil. Gaston, how long have you waited for revenge on the king?" She gestured over to where Gaston and Gil stood behind Harry and Captain Hook, who was holding Ben at the end of the plank. Ben's face was a bit pale as he looked frantically towards Mal. Harry Hook took a few steps forward and seized Ben's chin, squishing his cheeks to make Ben resemble a fish. The pirates laughed and jeered. Uma joined in the laughter as she turned back to Mal. "Bring me the wand or he'll be ripped apart." Uma leveled her voice and balled her fists.

"Let's just be smart," Mal smirked though she was feeling a bit like she was breathing smoke. "You throw him in, and I'll personally string you up by your braids." She looked over at Harry with her blood boiling. "Hear that, Hook?" She growled. "I will shove your father's accessory through your jaw and string you from the mast by it."

Harry turned the hook in his left hand over and over as he glared at Mal.

Mal considered her options like any good queen would. Uma had Ben, the bribing material. She could either play Uma's game and trust they wouldn't hurt Ben while she was gone and that Auradon wouldn't have a fit when she asked for the Fairy Godmother's wand and –

The wand. Why would they want the wand? A magical artifact that was powerful and... not useless inside the barrier. This wasn't about revenge on Mal, it was about escape. Of course, since her mother was involved. It was always about escape.

Mal glanced at the ropes that had been broken when Ursula fell into the sea the day before. They had been repaired and restrung twice over. They were attached equally as strong to the ship. If they wanted to escape, they'd have to cut through the newly-strengthened ropes, and there were so many it could take anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes.
A plan began to form in her head. There was some principle of magical barriers that she'd heard in
the moors – a barrier will never hold the person who created it. Or, by extension, the artifact that
created it. Meaning that the wand, which had shaped the barrier, would work inside the barrier.
And since she had re-conformed the barrier when the utopia was first built, she was also able
to perform magic inside of it. She'd certainly lost a bit of magic doing so much yesterday, but maybe
she could still bring down the barrier...

She rubbed her fingers together and felt a subtle static charge pick up. It was risky, but there were
so many villains she doubted they could shoot them all before someone managed to slit either hers
or Ben's throats. So, fight the villains with magic or risk someone dying. The barrier to Auradon
should keep out anyone who managed to escape the scene of the crime, so the only threat should be
to the Isle City or the Moorlands if the escapees can get that far. If she could get the barrier down
and then use magic and the stun guns to knock them out..."I have a counter-offer," Mal announced.

Uma laughed. "If you want to negotiate, take it to Auradon! I'm not here for debating." She picked
up a sword and pointed it to Ben. "You look at your prissy prince's face. How long do you expect
me to stay patient, Mal? I've waited years for this!"

"No one has to get hurt," Mal said. "You want the wand to bring down the barrier, yes? What if I
do it right here?" She pointed at the ground to accentuate her point. Behind her, Mal's crew
exchanged wild looks. She heard Audrey muttering under her breath.

The villains quieted in their anxious stirring and stared at her in shock. Mal cupped her hands and
breathed into them. A glowing sphere of green magic appeared in her hand. She held it aloft
proudly. Maleficent faltered and outstretched a hand like she was remembering what she'd lost all
those years ago. A crazed look filled her eyes, and Mal was reminded of those awful days where
her mother would lock them in the apartment to scheme on how to escape the Isle, even when
everyone else knew it was futile. Dr. Facilier, Lady Tremaine, Mother Gothel, Yzma, the Evil
Queen, and Jafar all stared at the green orb in her hands longingly.

Uma turned and saw the way the villains were staring at Mal with intense longing. She studied
Mal. "Bring Ben over." She commanded.

Captain Hook yanked Ben back so fast that Harry almost lost his balance and toppled overboard.
Gaston and Gil glared at Ben as the immortal Captain pulled Adam's son towards Uma. They
forced him to his knees on the gangplank and pushed his head down so that he couldn't even look
Mal in the eyes. Every muscle in his arm was taunt - like he was prepared to pounce.

How had Uma managed to wrap the worst villains in the land around her finger? Mal had never
seen her mother bow to anyone, yet here she was; letting Uma call shots.

"Bring it down first," Uma commanded, holding a new sword at ready. "Then you can snatch him
and go."

Mal held out a hand with half of the orb still on it. "Swear on your life and on the lives of everyone
here that you won't take him back after I bring it down."

Uma carefully skirted the edge of the gangplank, around Ben, and examined Mal's hand. "I so
swear." She agreed. They shook on it, and the orb dissolved upon contact with Uma's skin. Uma
stared at her hand, then retreated back behind Ben. Gaston walked to the edge of the gangplank and
pulled the sword Uma had been sharpening from the barrel. Captain Hook moved out of the way as
Gaston raised the sword above Ben's head.

Mal searched out for the magic of the barrier in the clouds above her. It took a little focus, but
having worked with the weaving before, she managed to find it. She felt all the way around the Isle quickly, knowing that the more time she spent at this, the more drained she would become. She was powerful, but not inexhaustible. Finally, when she had a good bearing of the barrier and its hinks and trauncts, she poured her magic into the faults and began severing the barrier's hold. A sonic boom echoed from the sky and the clouds parted. A single ray of sunshine fell down upon her head.

Unsecured items on the dock and on the ship began to float upwards. Gaston's sword was ripped from his hand as the Queen of Hearts began to float upwards just a tad. Audrey yelled in surprise behind Mal.

Mal raised her hand to the sky as a neon blue bolt of lightning arced down from the sky, striking her palm. Mal absorbed the Fairy Godmother's residual magic as if it were her own, even though she was aware it would change her magical structure slightly. The clouds overhead dispersed, and the air cleared as the open-sea wind whisked onto the Isle and carried the pollution away. The black water began to clear for the first time in thirty years as fresh sea waves washed in.

Mal brought her hand back down as the lightning ceased and swayed on the spot. Above their heads was the sound of wind chimes, but as everyone looked up, they realized it was the result of about thirty-years-worth of snow and rain freezing on top of the barrier now falling on their heads.

Everyone ducked as black and grey ice rained down. Uma shrieked and held her hands up to cover her face. Her arms were scraped by the deadly shrapnel as it crashed to the earth. Ben ducked his head so that his jacket got the worst of it, and Mal threw up a panic shield around herself so the ice slid off her bubble and directly into the sea below. It hit the water and dissolved into the ocean. The sun hit the Isle for the first time in about thirty years, and the black ice began to melt into the soil.

Everyone was silent as they stared at the dissipating clouds. Mal panted from the intense magical strain she'd just performed. Her knees shook. She stretched forward a hand to try and quickly bind her mother (Or at least knock her out) but the strain was too much for her. Her hand would do nothing. She'd brought the barrier down for nothing.

Maleficent laughed. In a panic, Mal lunged forward, seized Ben's hand, and pulled him toward her. His shoes skidded on the gangplank as she yanked him out of his shock and to his feet. His hand felt warm and secure in hers. "Go!" She yelled.

"What did you do?" He asked with wide eyes.

"Go, go, go!" Mal urged, pushing Ben towards the pier. She stretched her hand out and managed to summon a spell to knock Gaston out as the large man began to rush towards Belle's son. Then she turned and tried to shove Ben off the gangplank. "Go, leave!" She screamed.

Ben grabbed her arm to keep his balance and shook his head. "If you think I'm leaving you, we obviously don't know each other well enough to be married." He slipped past Mal, back onto the ship, taking his sword out of the sheath on her hip. Mal watched him return to the ship, raising his sword above his shoulder. A pirate dashed towards him with a slightly-rusty, one-edged sword. Ben balanced his weight, braced his sword, and Mal flinched. Their other teammates took up swords and rushed onto the ship to attack the villains after him.

Afterwards, Mal would think it was silly that she'd worried for him, but at the time she'd only ever seen him fight her for fun, never against people who wanted him dead.

The pirate slammed against Ben's sword with his own weapon, expecting the Auradon king to be
knocked back. Ben didn't even flinch. The pirate lost his footing upon being utterly unable to force Ben back and went skidding across the deck, slamming into the gangplank. Ben looked back at Mal with a firm, dedicated expression. She let loose a smile. He'd be just fine, she didn't need to protect him. She took up a sword and leveled her gaze with her mother, across the deck.

Maleficent summoned magic into her hands, just to watch the power flicker over her hands. And it occurred to Mal that her magic was actually a different color than Maleficent. It was brighter, more neon, and much more powerful. When had she become more powerful than Maleficent? She strode forward, bracing her sword, and marched to face her mother, heart hammering against her ribcage. Maleficent watched her daughter come forward, and a soft light entered her eyes. "You got a bit more height," She murmured.

Mal swallowed and a pinching feeling started in her throat. She felt power coming back into her hands slowly. "I'm still short." She mumbled, and Maleficent nodded.

"Like me," She agreed, and Mal flinched. She'd heard those words dozens of times before, all throughout her life, and they were not any less painful than they'd been before. Maleficent's expression was cold, but not frozen. "You know I would let you come back." She hummed. "You could be my daughter again. You wouldn't be a disappointment to me anymore."

Mal closed her eyes and let out a breath. "If the choice is a disappointment to you or a disappointment to myself, I know where my loyalties lie." She looked at her mom with tear pricking her eyes. "It's time to say goodbye to the past." Maleficent's face twisted up and the fairy witch let out a yell of outrage. Mal raised her sword and a free hand, and she and her mom began exchanging spell for spell for spell.

Across the deck, Ben was beginning a battle of his own. Harry Hook unsheathed his sword as he eyed Ben up and down. "You think you can hold a candle to an Islander, Young King?" He sneered. Behind Ben, the pirate who'd slammed the gangplank was slowly getting to his feet.

Ben watched enemies appear around him. It was clear that, while he was still considered easy prey, he was also considered a prized target. Seven pirates, including Harry Hook, surrounded him. Ben eyed each of them carefully. "I had another Islander say almost that exact same thing to me, and she got her rear end handed to her. Let's see how you do."

They couldn't all rush him at once without cutting themselves, so Ben just had to make sure and be fast. Harry Hook dashed forward with an ear-splitting screech and Ben threw him back. He whirled and caught another pirate's sword in a lock, hiked him backwards, and then caught his wrist to hurl him into two of his buddies. Then he was back to the front, sword fighting two more people and hiking them into the center of the deck, occasionally stopping to block pirates who were tailing him, trying to get him while his back was turned. With a splash, one went overboard.

Ben managed to steal a sword from one of his two opponents before he turned into a whirlwind of metal, forcing each of his remaining opponents back. Two more went into the ocean, and one hit his head against the mast, lifeless. Harry Hook looked about ready to spit blood. He jumped into the circle Ben had cleared around himself and stopped Ben swinging at a pirate who was dangerously pressed to the barrier of the deck. He and Ben parried and exchanged blow for blow for blow for blow. Beads of sweat appeared on Harry's forehead as he tried to keep up with Ben's quick, natural swings. The pirate was quickly wearing down. Ben forced Harry to his knees, feeling a little winded as the other an struggled to try and get to his feet.

"Well, being a king feels a lot better now, let me tell you?" He whispered. Harry bared his teeth and tried to push back against Ben, but Ben forced the pirate to stay grounded.
"I'm going to kill you, you filthy Auradon Beast!" Harry yelled, veins throbbing in his neck.

Ben, keeping Harry down and struggling under his blade with one hand used the other to take Harry's hook from him. He popped the hook off of his hand guard and displayed it to Harry. "This is mine now," Ben announced. He threw Harry to the ground and kicked him in the stomach. Then, he made as if he were tossing it overboard, slipping the hook into his sleeve. Harry panicked and leaped overboard, not even stopping to consider the idea that Ben had kept it. Ben turned to the last two opponents and readied his swords. Both looked fairly surprised he'd managed to fight so well, but only one looked doubtful in their ability to take him down.

One jumped forward, but Ben threw them back using their own weight. They collapsed into the wall of the upper-level portion of the ship and went motionless. When Ben turned around, the last pirate had disappeared. Jay was staring at Ben, amazing and holding a sword uselessly in his right hand. Ben exhaled and waited to see what Jay would say, but it appeared Mal's old friend was at a loss for words.

"I - uh - was coming to rescue you," Jay explained, sounding very surprised.

Ben kept a straight face as he wondered why Isle People had a habit of assuming all Auradonians were weak. All things considered, it had been the heroes that had defeated the villains, not the other way around. But, since he couldn't exactly articulate this logic, he just shrugged. "Mal and I have more in common than we seem."

Jay's expression fell but didn't darken. He exhaled. "Yeah, I'm starting to see that," He admitted. Ben felt an invisible wind lift him up. He was finally starting to get it.

Ben held up his sword and Jay did the same. "Let's do this?" Ben asked.

Jay nodded. "Let's," he agreed. "And later, you'll have to teach me some of your moves."

"Think I measure up?" Ben asked, raising a little eyebrow.

Jay exhaled. "Dude, I'm going to have to stop underestimating you Auradon Folks. I think you could kick my butt any way to Sunday and back." Ben burst into laughter and together they rushed into battle.

Audrey and Lonnie took up close stances with Audrey mirroring Lonnie's movements as much as possible and Lonnie picking up Audrey's slack as best she could. Carlos and Captain Hook were exchanging swipes. Carlos wasn't as well-trained as Hook, but he was certainly much faster than him. Jay and Ben Jumped around the ship, knocking enemies off and keeping attention on them. History had never seen a pair more talented in swordsmanship than those two.

Maleficent let loose a wild cackle as she summoned her magic upon her. Green flames engulfed her feet. Mal stretched forth a hand and they vanished, leaving only seared marks at her mother's feet. She was still exhausted, but her magic had returned and was fairing strong. Someone seized a new sword and rushed at her, but a blue laser blew out from behind Mal and struck him in the chest. He howled once and toppled into the sea.

Jay leaped past Mal with a stun gun in one hand and a sword in the other. He shot Dr. Facilier as the man pulled a handful of pink powder out of a pouch at his hip. Dr. Facilier fell to the ground. The powder spilled out of his hand and across the deck. Immediately, the deck began to glow golden. Mal's eyes widened as she realized what was happening. Not too long ago, of course, Tinker Bell had pixie-dusted the entire ship. Now, it seemed Dr. Facilier had re-summoned the flying enchantment. She'd heard a rumor that Dr. Facilier only specialized in illusion magic, and to
do any serious voodoo he had to request help from his 'friends', but the ship was rising into the sky, obviously real. Mal jumped aboard as the ship began to strain at its bonds and yanked her sword out of the pouch that she'd carried all the other swords in. Uma swung at her, but Mal ducked and the two began to battle swing for swing, blow for blow. Behind her, the rest of her teammates were jumping aboard, including Ben, who grabbed a second sword from Uma's barrel and ran to pick a fight with Captain Hook, immediately driving the other man into the ground, figuratively and literally.

"Ben!" Mal yelled. She ripped the stun gun from her hip and threw it to him. It landed on the deck where he slid and grabbed it. He shot the Queen of Hearts, who fell to the deck. As the ship rose into the sky, the ropes tying it to the dock began to strain but refused to break. The ship left the water entirely, and the deck tilted. Villains began falling overboard, but Mal's team and a couple of lucky crew members seized the ropes and pulleys that covered the ship and planted their feet firmly as the boat began to be pulled to a harsh ninety-degree angle, hanging off the dock by the ropes securing it. Mal gripped the side of the ship, which was now parallel with the ground. Only Maleficent remained standing upright as magic rooted her to the deck. She cackled as she played with green fire in her hands obsessively. As she walked across the vertical deck to Mal, Mal's newly unstable magic lashed out. Maleficent dodged sparks and grabbed her daughter's face. She twisted it from side to side. "A magical queen," She sneered. "I'll show you what a true evilicious magical queen can be!" Her eyes lit up like emeralds held in front of a fire and Maleficent dissolved into smoke. Mal gasped, fearing that her mother was going to try to head to Auradon, but instead, her form began to swirl and change.

In Maleficent's place was now a magical dragon, flying alongside the ship as it shrieked and yelled. The dragon had ugly, grey, scaly horns growing out of its head like a demented crown. Its body was covered in iron-like purple scales with large scars here and there. It howled and began to circle the ship.

"Mal!" Ben yelled from where he was hanging onto the rope ladder leading up to the bird's nest. "We can't keep this up forever!"

Mal knew he was right. "I don't know what to do!" She shrieked back. Originally, when she'd planned to bring down the barrier, she'd thought she could immediately bind Maleficent and Facilier before taking care of everyone else. Now that Maleficent had gone dragon and the ship was floating? Not so much.

"You can do this, Mal!" Someone yelled above her. Mal looked up to see that it was Audrey, who was hanging onto the opposite side of the ship for dear life.

"You're going down, Mal," Uma growled. She'd righted her feet on the side of the ship and was bearing her sword in hand. Mal knew she had to act fast, but she still didn't know what to do.

As Mal looked around desperately, Uma leaped into action. All Mal saw was the flash of polished steel as Uma's blade of injustice came down on her head.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, 101 Dalmanations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Peter Pan, The Little Mermaid, Mulan, or the Princess and the Frog.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

The Isle Rush Ends. Ben is introduced to Malice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One thing Mal knew about life or death situations from previous altercations is that when you're about to die, and your body knows it, you get the craziest, most kinetically impossible ideas. And sometimes, they even work.

Mal saw her entire life flash before her eyes before she leaped into action. Birth, childhood, to now. Sometime around when she was kissing Ben for the first time in his car, she paused her life video so that she could execute her crazy plan and live. As Uma's blade came down on her head, she swayed and rolled right around Uma's legs, which was no easy feat considering the railing on the ship was rounded and polished and hovering above the ground. As Uma was trying to pivot around without falling, Mal kicked her in the knees. Uma dropped her sword, which tumbled off of the ship and hit Maleficent's tail on the way down, in order to catch herself in the railing. Mal scrambled away by balancing along the balcony railing as it creaked and wiggled underneath her and Uma's combined weight.

Above her, Audrey, Evie, Jay, Ben, Lonnie, and everyone was trying to pull themselves up to secure their safety from the fall. Most of the fighting had ceased as everyone struggling to keep from falling to the ground and the dragon below. Mal's eyes skimmed her surroundings and she came to a quick conclusion: She needed to level the playing field.

She left her sword next to the deck, grabbed the edge of the railing, checked to see that Uma still had not fully regained her balance, and swung down over the side of the ship. She heard Ben, Audrey, and Lonnie shout in surprise. She held on by clutching her knees around the railing and using her hands as if she were climbing a ladder as she examined the lines that were holding the ship to the ground. There were nine in all, extremely thick, and secured using many strong loops to both the ship's railing and to concrete pillars down on the dock. The wharf had been partially destroyed when the ship went airborne, but those pillars weren't going to budge. On the other hand, the old, rickety Jolly Roger might lose half of its hull if the strain wasn't leveled.

Mal looked at her sword and made a small whimper. She pulled herself back up and took her sword in two hands. "Break apart and become a dart." She commanded the sword. A green glow overtook it and faded. Mal snapped off the hilt as if it were a small stick and split the blade into six equal parts, keeping wary of the sharp edges. She heard Uma get to her feet and start walking up the polishing railing to her. Mal tucked the sword parts into her sword bag and slung it carefully over her arm. Then she grabbed the railing again and swung back over.

The ocean seemed miles away. If she fell, only her magic would save her. The fall would either break her entire body or kill her. Mal took a deep breath and carefully fished a sword part out of her bag. Above her, she heard Uma cackle. "Oh, Mal!" She said gleefully.

Mal held the shard to her lips and muttered: "Fly straight, fly true; Nothing can stop you."
shard lit up again, and without a second thought, Mal flung it towards the ropes that were holding the ship to the ground. It cut through the four on that side, reaching all the way to the bow before the spell wore off and it dropped into the water below.

The boat lurched upwards. Everyone yelled and screamed as the bow section rose higher into the air. Only five ropes remained now, and they were pulling even harder on the old ship. Mal didn’t have much time.

Uma had slid down when the ship lurched and was now at the stern of the ship, favoring a hurt arm and leg. She looked absolutely bloodthirsty. Governor Ratcliff, Clayton, and Shan Yu’s nephew had landed hard near the stairwell and were groaning in pain. Shan Yu's nephew had obviously broken his leg, as it was bent at the thigh bone instead of at the knee. Mal looked away with her stomach actually churning.

She began to climb down the railing as if it were a ladder. Uma began to climb up. As Mal passed the fifth restraint, she charmed a sword piece and hacked it off the ship. The Jolly Roger rose even further into the air, and Uma fell back down, this time falling on her back and crying out in pain.

This had to end.

Mal swung herself back under the railing. Maleficent flew by and breathed a torrent of flames her way. Only Mal’s quick reflexes allowed her to jump back to safety before she dropped back down again. She re-charmed the piece she’d used to hack off the fifth piece and flung it towards the remaining ropes. She cut two, but two more remained. As she yanked a third piece out and held it to her lips, something grabbed her by the neck.

It was Shan Yu, the real villain. He rambled on in Wei for a few seconds and shook her at her mother. Quickly, Mal focused and made her skin hot to the touch. Shan Yu dropped her with a yelp. She skidded down the railing but managed to catch herself halfway between Shan Yu and Uma, who had struggled to her feet and was now pulling herself up the railing, crying as she tried to not move her back.

It was now or never.

Mal swung one last time over the railing and sliced the last two ropes away with one fling of her piece. She nicked her finger on that throw and a drop of blood fell onto the wood and dissolved. The boat suddenly lurched upwards, righting itself as it went. Uma screamed as she was thrown onto the deck, and finally could move no more. The only sign she wasn’t dead were the whimpers that echoed through the floorboards.

Mal clutched onto the railing as the boat leveled off high above the Isle of the Lost. She could see the city, Auradon, and the mountain range that divided North Auradon from South Auradon.

The air was a lot thinner up here, but still breathable. Mal used every fiber of strength left in her arms to pull her body back over the railing, only to be seized by Shan Yu once more.

Shan Yu laughed as he dangled Mal over the edge of the ship. Maleficent the dragon was flying up to meet them, and from the sounds that she was making, Mal thought her mother might be laughing at her.

She had no more strength; nothing left to give. Her fingers clawed uselessly at Shan Yu's meaty hands. Shan Yu squeezed her airway so tightly that her vision started to go dark. Her voice came out as useless fish sounds and for a while, Mal was sure that that was where she was going to die.
Then she heard the sound of running footsteps and felt the air move as someone punched Shan Yu in his glorious face, right in between his bright yellow eyes, with so much force he was knocked clear off the ship. Someone grabbed her hand as Shan Yu fell. As soon as his feet left the ship, his hold on her neck loosened, and sweet-tasting, glorious air rushed into her. Shan Yu fell to the wharf below and for a second she fell right beside him until the hold on her arm stopped her and she was left dangling off the side with someone squeezing her fingers for dear life. She coughed and looked up to see her savior.

It was Ben. He'd lost his hat, and his jacket was torn where the sleeves met shoulders. A few pieces of shrapnel had sliced his face, but he was otherwise alright.

"I've got you!" He told her as he hoisted her up. As soon as she was within reach, he hooked his arm around her thighs and pulled her onto the deck, where he wrapped his arms around her. She was so exhausted she couldn't even stand on her own. He pressed dozens of desperate kisses to her hair, burying his face in her locks. Her fingertips skimmed his neck but couldn't find a hold.

Behind them, the villains were being quickly overrun. Now that the immediate threat of people dying had been canceled out, there was no reason to not fight back full force. The villains were no match for the stun guns. They were quickly being annihilated. Poor Uma laid on the lower deck, weeping as she lay in utter pain. Other villains were left in their misery, to moan and groan as they waited for relief.

Ben set her on the deck. "Rest." He commanded. "We may need you to take us down again." Mal nodded and collapsed against the rough wooden planks. Ben immediately took up guard around her with his sword held in perfect form as he stood in front of her.

As Mal lay on the deck, her mother circled above her. She looked like a vulture, waiting to feed on Mal's flesh. She sat back up and stared at her mom. Then, against Ben's command, she used the railing to pull herself back up. "Mal?" Ben asked.

"Evie, Jay, Carlos, Lonnie, Audrey, Sammy, over here! Behind me!" Mal called.

Sammy, the small Isle boy, shot Drizella Tremaine in between her eyebrows. They all glanced at the last villain – Maleficent - and ran to do as Mal asked.

As her friends fell into formation behind her, Mal wrapped one hand around the railing to steady herself and the other hand around Ben's. She stared her mother's dragon form in the eyes and willed it to stop flying and hover in front of them.

Miraculously, the dragon began to move against its will towards them. It let out a squawk, almost like a chicken's, as Mal willed it to be on eye-level with her. She thought she might collapse from the effort, but it was easier when she was able to draw strength from the people behind her.

"The strength of evil is good as none when stands before pure hearts as one." She recited. Maleficent shook. "The strength of evil is good as none when stands before pure hearts as one." She repeated.

Beside her, Ben took up the mantra. "The strength of evil is good as none when stands before pure hearts as one." They recited together.

On the next recital, all of her friends joined in. "The strength of evil is good as none when stands before pure hearts as one." They repeated it four more times. Eight in all; one for each of them.

The dragon let out another squawk and vanished in a poof of smoke. A lizard appeared in its place.
Mal thrust out her hand to catch it with levitation before it fell to the ground below. She pulled it towards the ship and set it down on the deck. Ben promptly picked it up before it could run off. He took the sword bag from Mal and emptied the contents out over the ship. He tossed Maleficent the Lizard into the bag and pulled the drawstring tight. They all each took a long, deep breath.

"That was a wide ride." Audrey murmured.

"It was." Evie agreed. Everyone else nodded.

Ben pulled Audrey into a hug as Mal lowered herself back onto the deck and lay her head against the railing. "I'm really proud of you, Audrey." He told her seriously. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Audrey pulled herself out of his grip and looked at her hands. There were new calluses and cuts that hadn't been there the day before, but she didn't seem to mind them all that much.

"It means a lot that you approve, Ben," Audrey said slowly. "Believe me, I've waited a long time to hear something like that from you. But what's even more important is that I didn't know I could do it. I didn't know I had it in me until Mal told me I was going to be group one."

Ben smiled. "Mal has a way of bringing out the good in everyone, despite how bad she claims she is." He bent down and kissed Mal's cheek as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

"Give me a few hours to recover." Mal yawned, pointing at him. "And then I'll show you how bad I can be, beast boy."

"Ew," Evie said, gagging and sticking a finger in her mouth as she turned away.

Ben rolled his eyes. "We'll see about that, tough girl. Now we've just got to figure out how to get this thing back to the ground." He leaned out over the railing and studied the ground, far below them.

"Can I help?" Someone asked from the far side of the ship. Everyone jumped around to see a boy with flamboyant red hair, wearing elf shoes and a green outfit as he balanced on the ship's railing.

"Peter Pan?" Lonnie asked in surprise.

Peter took off his feathered cap as he bowed low to the ground. "At your service!" He declared. He jumped off the railing and zoomed through the air to the Captain's wheel. He saluted them all, and then slowly began to direct them back to the ground.

Mal was just about ready to fall asleep. In under an hour, she'd incinerated a thirty-year-old barrier, held on for dear life as she severed an entire ship off the dock, and nearly died several times. Still, she knew she had work to do.

"Help me up." She commanded Ben and Evie.

Shan Yu's nephew had mostly gone into shock but was still whimpering. He refused to move his leg. Mal took the limb and straightened it out as best she could, despite the fact he howled and begged her not to touch it. Then she murmured: "Be real and heal," and the bone straightened itself up and the skin stitched itself closed.

She briefly healed the others, and then approached Uma. Uma's dirty braids were in knots in her outfit, and she laid with her legs splayed out awkwardly. As Mal came closer, Uma tried to scoot away using her hands. It was then she realized that the younger girl didn't have any control over her
legs. Something was horribly broken in her spine.

Mal bent down beside Uma. "I can heal you." She offered, refusing to look at the girl's twisted lower body.

"I'd rather die." Uma spat.

"I can arrange that too." Mal rolled her eyes. They were still reasonably high in the air, after all.


Mal stared at her old enemy and gave to a conclusion in her mind; she might have made Uma into the monster she was. If only she hadn't been so prideful years ago.

Mal wrung her hands. "Listen, your chances in the city are forfeited because of this. You kidnapped and held hostage hundreds, with or without my mother's directions. I can leave you like this here and you can live a short while as a cripple before you're killed by someone else. Or, I can heal you on the condition you'll let us leave peaceably."

Uma glowered. "If you heal me, I'll kill you. I'll hunt you down, Mal. No matter where you go, I'll never stop coming for you."

Ben's hands curled protectively into Mal's shoulders. Mal balled her hands up in frustration. "What can I do?" I demanded. "I can't fix what I did. The person you are now can't live in the city - I'd have to kick you back out. I'm offering you a chance to move on and forget."

"Forget everything you did to everyone and forget everything Auradon did to us?" Uma's face twisted. "You never had to deal with scrubbing til your hands were bleeding and the entire Isle kicking you around because the daughter of Maleficent didn't like you!" She closed her eyes and shook her head furiously. "I wish I could."

Mal's hands stilled. She swallowed. "There might be something magical I could do to fix it, but..." She shook her head.

Uma stilled, processing Mal's words, and then turned her head a little to squint at the magical queen. "Take it away," She demanded. "Make me forget everything."

Mal's mouth fell open. "I don't... are you sure?" She gasped.

Uma nodded and set her jaw. "Do it," She hissed.

Mal's hands shook as she turned and looked at Ben, who looked uneasy. He took one of her palms as Mal tried to think. If she did this, then there wouldn't be any reason Uma couldn't come and live in the city and have pretty soaps and shampoos to finally wash that shrimp smell out of her hair. She wouldn't have to remember the pain, or what the Isle was like before. She could let everything go and be free. Maybe She could finally be happy, out from under her mom's thumb and not having to fight for her life anymore.

There was a long pause as everyone exchanged glances. Uma's eyes were growing softer. Every Isle child was well acquainted with the pits of the devil, as that was another word for the Isle of the Lost. Uma had been through torture and loss, and she knew those were things one doesn't just get over. A fresh start, though...

"Let's think about this," Ben cautioned. "Are you sure?"
Uma blinked. "I'm sure," She affirmed and gave a slow, blissful nod.

Audrey jumped forward and put a hand on Mal's shoulder. "Maybe this is a bit drastic?" She gasped, looking down anxiously at Uma. "Erase a person's memories? As in, everything that makes them them? Can't she just be taught and learn? You gave some of the other villains leeway."

"The villains I gave leeway weren't promising to kill me, and rotted here on an island for almost forty years." Mal raised her eyebrows. "The ones who maybe shouldn't have come in were Evelyn, because she still believes she was helping people by terrorizing them, and Hades. Evelyn barely scrapes by since she understands the other side and has covenanted to repentance. But she's also the most-watched in the city. I don't know how Hades passed Mercy's tests yet, but he's very obviously repentant. Uma, on the other hand, will never be able to stop hating me. She held an entire generation captive and people have starved to death and died of exposure because of her and my mother. Maybe in forty years, I might let her in the city, but the moment she tries for my life she'd be back out again - permanently. The magic barriers don't allow for murder attempts."

"Then heal her and leave her," Audrey responded. "There's a spell for sleep, right? She can live on the Isle with the villains."

"Yes, with Gaston," Mal agreed, watching Uma's expression twist. "She'd be the only young girl left on the Isle except for a few other stragglers, maybe. I wouldn't want to stick around to see what kind of scene that will create. With the city as it is, I won't be able to instate force laws that prevent murders and other extreme crimes entirely on the Isle until they're stable. That'd probably be plenty of time for him to go hunting again."

"Hunting?" Audrey asked, but Carlos set a hand on her shoulder.

"You don't want to know," He shook his head.

Uma's eyes were dark as she considered Mal's words. "I want to forget," She gritted out. "I want to. But I hope you remember what you did forever, because you're still going to be dragged down to misery for it."

"Are you sure?" Audrey gasped, clenching her hands at her sides.

Evie stepped forward and put her arms around Audrey's shoulders. "There's a joke on the Isle. 'If the crime isn't remembered, you're not a villain'. It used to mean 'do something big' but lately it's been meaning 'put it behind you'. More Isle kids than you realize would pay to forget everything they grew up around. All the crime and the horrors..."

Mal and Evie met eyes, and they both knew they were thinking of the same thing. Mal rubbed her hands together and looked to the deck. There were things she'd like to forget, sure, but they were also things she needed to know for her job.

Mal carefully moved to take Uma's head in her lap. She put her hands on the girl's shoulders as Uma cried out and tears fell down her face. "To see you whole is my only goal." Mal's voice cracked. "To set your life on track, I gift you a brand-new back."

Uma's body straightened. Her legs relaxed, and Uma gave her foot a testing twitch. Tears filled her eyes. She looked up to meet Mal's eyes, but no thanks fell from her lips. The hate still lingered in the girl's eyes. Mal smoothed Uma's braids down and put her hands back on her head. "No more sorrow, no more fantasy. Relieve your pain and no more memory." She whispered softly.

She removed her hands from Uma's head. The girl frowned, momentarily confused, and then her
face relaxed. Fear and anger faded from her eyes, and her emotions flatlined and erased. Uma's eyes drifted closed, and she faded out of the world in a blessed sleep.

Mal wiped her eyes as soft tears began to fill them. "I guess that's it." She sighed. "She won't know me as a monster."

Evie brushed a hand down Uma's soft, dirty cheek. "Are you going to tell her?" She asked.

"Not now," Mal said. "I want her to find a life for herself without knowing who she was before. And after a little while... yeah, I'll tell her. And I'll tell her she wanted me to take her memories as well. Just not now."

Mal brushed a careful hand over Uma's forehead and set her old enemy's head on the ground. Everyone dropped to the deck around her, slumping against each other in exhaustion. Mal stared down at Uma, and then a force of shock so powerful it almost made her horns reappear shook her, and she whipped around and punched Ben's arm as hard as she could. Tears jumped into her eyes and started staining her cheeks as Ben jumped away from her. "Ow!" He yelped. "Why'd you do that!"

"I trusted you outside the city," Mal sobbed. "I trusted you to be smart and you put your sword down and got captured! Do you know what you did to me?"

Ben's eyes softened, though he rubbed his arm still and looked a little weary and annoyed. "I'm sorry, Mal. I should have just held onto it." He reached out and wiped a tear off her cheek. His thumb came away luminescent green, making Mal reach up and begin wiping away her own magic-infused tears before they could stain her cheeks green. He watched her with a little half-smile. "Keep crying like this and people will think you actually missed me," He teased her softly.

Mal broke down, grabbing the front of his shirt and burying her face into his Isle jacket. She could barely even keep her head up as tired as she was and so she focused on keeping her fingers twisted into the leather to keep her up. Ben brought her closer for a hug. "Sleep." He whispered. "You've done so much, and you're tired. Sleep."

Mal continued shaking her head furiously, keeping her fingers twisted into his jacket. "You can't leave," She told him. "If I wake up and you're gone, I'll seriously burn Auradon to the ground to find you."

Ben shook his head and she could imagine him rolling his eyes a little at her proclamation. "I'll be here," He assured her. "Now rest. Everything will be fine."

Mal took his hands and squeezed them tightly. She looked at him with an intensity he hadn't ever seen on her before - desperation, almost. He pulled his hands out of her grasp and smoothed her shaking palms out over her knees. "We're together now," He mumbled, setting his hand on hers. "Don't worry anymore."

"I don't want to be without you again," Mal mumbled.

A smile lit up Ben's eyes. He smoothed her hair down. "Sleep now. I'll be right here." As Peter Pan carefully navigated them back to the ground, Mal used the last amounts of strength in her body to pull herself away from Uma's sleeping frame and into Ben's arms. He wrapped his arms around her sore, overworked muscles, and kissed the top of her head as her eyes drifted closed.

Later that evening, the barrier returned to the sky. The bright colors of the sunset fell over the ruined buildings of the Isle of the Lost as the magical force sealed itself over the Isle. Mal, having
remained unconscious all day after Peter Pan had delivered them back to the city, raised the barrier anew once more, with new regulations to help with the extreme pollution and natural decay on the Isle. This marked an important new era, as it was the first time the barrier would be tied solely to a person, and not to an artifact. No longer would the Fairy Godmother's wand be able to work inside the Isle. Only Mal would be able to perform magic inside the barrier, and she'd have to slowly teach her descendants how to access the barrier from the outside as they got older.

The Isle residents gathered on the beach to watch the large green shield grow over the outside world. It almost looked like a stained-glass bottle. Only a little less than a hundred people remained outside the city.

As the top sealed off against the darkening colors of the sky, Mal let her arms fall. Ben, who had been standing beside her, took her hand. "You're amazing." He told her honestly.

Mal chuckled. "I learned from an even more amazing person." She said and quickly kissed his cheek. They were still standing on the deck of the Jolly Roger, which had been unloaded of its cargo and washed out. Peter Pan was going to take the ship back to Neverland, where it belonged. Mal turned and watched Uma, who was looking down at the sand suspiciously.

"What do you think, Uma?" Mal asked, saying Uma's name so she could hear it clearly. Uma glanced over, and then went back to examining the beach.

"It doesn't look like you can stand on it," Uma decided. "It's like you'll sink right into it."

"You can stand on it," Mal promised. "Here, come on, I'll show you. We need to get you a card, and I need to go and help the people coming in anyways." She gestured broadly to the gangplank. Uma took a few steps forward and then tried to carefully take a few steps down. She almost slipped as her shoes caught on a rough nail. Ben grabbed her elbow before she could topple to the ground.

"Woah!" He called. "Easy, there. Here, let me take you to the ground." He held onto Uma's arm and took her down the gangplank and to the sands below. Mal watched from above as she took her first steps onto the beach and gave a short nod of approval before Ben turned and stretched his hand up for her. She took it as she walked down, smiling as she stepped beside him.

"Well, I'd best be off, then," Peter called. He waved to everyone on the beach, some of whom were gaping in surprise and pointing. "So long!" He waved and took up his place behind the wheel. "Off to Neverland!" Was his final cry as the ship lifted off the ground and returned to the sky. The people watched it fade out of view, waving as it passed through the barrier above them and continued onwards. The stars were just starting to appear in the sky.

"You did good," Ben whispered in her ear as they watched Uma look around, down at the beach and towards the sunset in the sky.

"I'm not done," Mal reminded him. "There are still people outside." She exhaled and squeezed his hand, still interlocked beside her own.

"Mal!" Evie called as she hurried towards the purple fairy with her shoes in one hand and a taller, handsome boy's upper arm in the other. "I need you to meet someone!"

Mal looked over her shoulder and switched hands with Ben as they turned. "Hi, Evie," Mal said. "Who is this?"

"This is Evan." Evie presented the tall, handsome man. "My brother."

Mal's eyebrows shot up. "I didn't know you had a brother." She said, holding out a hand to Evan.
"Hi." She smiled. "I'm Mal."

"I know." He nodded. "Your mom is Maleficent." Behind Evan, Jay, Carlos, Lonnie, and Audrey were approaching the group. Lonnie and Jay appeared to be laughing together. Mal let go of Ben's hand and looped her arm through his as they got closer.

"Evan is kind of a pedigree fanatic," Evie explained. "He says he knows the parentage of about eighty percent of the Isle kids."

Mal's eyebrows climbed even higher. "Eighty percent?" She asked.

"Yeah…" Evan trailed off as he rubbed the back of his head. "Um, Carlos's dad was an old business partner of Cruella's. Jay's mom was a murderess who Gaston killed a few years ago. I don't know Mal's dad, but I know that little Malice was fathered by Jafar."

Ben crinkled his forehead. "Who?" He asked.

Mal almost bit through her cheek. "Malice?" She asked. "As in my little sister? Mom named her Malice?"

Ben turned to Mal. "You have a sister?" He asked.

"Yeah. You'd have already met her if you hadn't been captured." Mal glared sarcastically at Ben. She looked back to Evan. "But for real, Mom named her Malice? That's not okay. I'm changing her name."

Jay looked a little green. "Who cares about her name?" He sputtered. "Are you not going to comment on the fact your mom and my dad totally hooked up to have a kid?!"

"Nope." Mal held a hand up in his face. "I'm not even going to go there." She returned her attention back to Evan. "What else do you know?" She asked.

"Uma's dad is Triton." Evan began to tick off on his fingers. "Harry Hook is the son of the eldest daughter of Gaston, who may still be alive. Cruella had a daughter named Carly before Carlos was born, but she disappeared, and no one knows where she went. Lots of people have assumed Cruella killed her. Gil came to the Isle after the barrier was created. I think his mom lives in Auradon. Clay Clayton's mom was called the Miranda killer. You know of the Miranda rights? She based her name off of that." Evan opened his mouth to continue and then shoved his hands into his pockets. "I know, like, lots more." He said sheepishly. "Biology fascinates me."

"How do you know all this?" Mal's head was spinning. She pressed a hand to her temple.

Evie began to laugh, which brought Mal straight back down to earth. Evan had turned bright red and was glaring at his sister.

"What?" Mal asked.

"You'll never believe it." Evie laughed. "He's a floozy. He makes his way around in exchange for information like that."

"Excuse me?" Audrey asked, clearly appalled.

"It's not like that all the time!" Evan protested. "I mean – seriously – most of the time they'll admit stuff if I just kiss them hard enough. The sleeping thing was more for survival. I have standards, guys."
Mal pinched her lips together. "Clearly." She teased as Evan's face grew even darker. "But it's great that you have, I guess. Is there any way you'd be willing to find my two secretaries, Evelyn and Eliza, and have them record anything you can remember? Even if it's not a lot, tons of Isle kids have no idea where they came from, so I'm positive that they'd be grateful for the information. I can arrange for you to earn card points too."

"That sounds great." Evan relaxed. "I'm still not sure what I want to do yet, so it'll be great to have something small I can work on while I work up to that. By the way, when do you expect people to officially take up work?"

"Well, I'm hoping to get everyone settled and with future plans by two Saturdays from now, even just to hear people's ideas. Lots of folks will need a few specialized things brought in from Auradon to even start. But by the time I return in October, everything should be running semi-smoothly." Mal replied. There would, of course, be some people she'd have to tell no to until they had people who could come in to teach certain trade skills and a proper infrastructure up.

Ben squeezed her hand. "October." He reminded her.

Mal smiled. "Yes. I've been stuck with you for over a year now." She bumped him with her hip and smiled.

"Crazy." Ben rubbed his eyes with one hand. Overhead, the stars were beginning to appear. Down by the tide, small children were running into the waves and squealing. Young and old mothers brought children into the cold salty waves to use the sand to scrub off the worst of the years of grime. Ben yawned. "I want to go home." He admitted to Mal. "I want to sleep in my own bed. The Isle is great, but I want to go see my parents."

"Aww." Jay snickered. "He wants to go see mommy and daddy."

"Me too." Mal sighed. "I want to see your mom and dad too. I want to talk to Belle and Sophia. Maybe I'll just trust the people here to finish up and I'll go home for a night and a day." She put a hand on Evan's arm. "Thank you for being so willing to help. If you don't mind, I need to find my sister, and figure out what to do with my mom."

"Of course." Evan agreed, backing away. "Maybe I'll see you within the next week?"

"More than likely." Mal nodded. There was still a lot of work to do, after all. "Goodnight, Evan!"

"Goodnight!" He called and disappeared into the crowd.

"To think your brother is such a hottie." Mal winked at Evie. "I thought he was an old fling when you first walked him up."

"Evil Queen genes." Evie nodded. She hid a yawn behind her hand. "Can I come back to Auradon with you tonight?"

"Of course." Mal nodded. "We'll have to take a back way in since the main road has closed already."

"That, or you could just fly us in," Ben suggested. The small group laughed, all except for Audrey.

"Um, Mal?" Audrey asked. "Actually, I was wondering if I could hang out tonight?" She gestured with a thumb back to the apartments. "If it's okay with you, I'll stay in the same apartment I was in last night. Besides, I think a couple of the Isle boys are planning on having a party."
"Ooh, a party." Mal's eyes sparkled. "Remember the days we used to do that, boys?" She smiled at Jay and Carlos.

"Oh yes." Evie agreed dryly. "I remember quite vividly how you locked me into Carlos's mom's closet."

"You planning on staying?" Carlos asked Mal.

"Nah." Mal shook her head. "I'm a mature lady now. Married and everything." She held Ben's hand up for proof even as Evie, Jay, and Carlos's smiles faded a tad. "Besides." Mal continued. "I broke and re-erected an entire island's barrier today. I need my sleep."

Everyone chuckled. Mal gave Audrey a discrete thumbs-up of approval as the conversation moved on. Ben stole her attention by waving a hand in her vision. "So, your sister?" He prodded.

"We rescued her off the ship," Mal explained. "She's brand-new. And my dad... he's actually in the city now too."

"Your dad?" Ben's eyes grew a little wide and he looked around a little, as if expecting a tall man with purple hair and green eyes to materialize. "Who is he?"

"Hades," Mal revealed. She brushed her hair back and watched Ben's expression fall a little slack as he took in this revelation.

"Ha - he - your parents..." Ben pressed his fingertips to his forehead. "My parents-in-law are Maleficent and Hades. That's what you're saying?"

"He wants to meet you," Mal whispered, squeezing his hand a little.

"Hades," Ben repeated, looking starstruck. "Meet me. My father-in-law wants to meet me."

"That okay?" Mal asked, raising an eyebrow at his repetitions.

"Is he... angry?" Ben asked cautiously. His palm began to feel a bit sweaty. Mal understood. She'd wondered if Belle and Adam would execute her when she'd first arrived, and Adam didn't have the influence or the power to keep her in immortal pain after she actually died.

"No," Mal reassured him. "I think he just wants to be a part of my life, for once." She shook her head. "It's complicated. I'll sort everything out later."

Instead of heading down to the dock, Mal led her team back up to the orphanage area. They slipped inside. Now, there were parents searching for children and volunteers who had offered to care for children crowded inside. Ben's smile fell as he stared at all of the wounded people in the area. Many refused to look at him, and he knew they were thinking of the various ways the monarchy had robbed them. Goosebumps formed on his arm.

Mal went to a woman in the back who, though obviously tired, was smiling as she cooed to small children and handed out soft toys. "Hello." Mal greeted her. "Is my sister still here?" She asked.

"Yes." The woman smiled. "It's nice to see you again. Bring her back anytime. She's asleep in that little cradle over there." The woman pointed to a lone cradle in a corner and went off to help a small boy who was holding an empty sippy cup and pouting silently.

Mal let go of Ben's hand and went to peer inside. She scooped up a tightly-wrapped bundle and turned around to show Ben. Jay, Evie, Audrey, and Carlos had already seen little Malice, but they
smiled like this was their first time laying eyes on her as they spotted her naturally purple hair curling softly over the pillow. Ben's breath caught as he peered on the face of the sleeping girl. She hadn't been completely cleaned, but her face and arms had been sponged off.

"She looks just like you!" He gasped, eyes flicking back and forth between the two girls.

"Well, people who are related often bear similar features," Mal nodded.

"Can I hold her?" He asked, stretching his arms out a bit.

"Maybe on the boat," Mal answered. "I have her now." She waved to the woman once more as they began to head out. "Thanks again, Claudine!"

"Anytime!" Claudine called back with a smile.

As the door swung closed behind them, Mal quickly hissed: "Daughter of Judge Frollo."

They had to find Eliza before they could leave. Eliza was delegating tasks left and right, assigning people to help others to apartments and ordering others to fetch things like extra card boxes or possession coins. Mal explained that she was taking people, including the King of Auradon, back to Auradon and that she was going to organize a place for her sister. She might be back the next day, but chances were she'd be busy trying to organize people like doctors and pharmacists to the Isle of the Lost. The sun had mostly set as they returned to the dock and waited for the soldiers to finish loading the boat. Ben hovered over her like some sort of overgrown fly or mosquito as she carefully held onto little Malice. He looked absolutely excited.

"Carlos," Mal began, moving her head to see past Ben as he ran his knuckles down Malice's cheek, "I have a favor I need to ask you."

"What is it, Mal?" Carlos asked, shoving his hands into his pockets and taking a few steps forward.

"I want to get the Isle an interweb of its own. Something separate from Auradon that will still connect the two systems so we can have some intermingling. But I want to be able to filter some content," Mal announced. "Building bombs and things like that. If I got a small team and some experienced helpers, could you head that and bring an internet to the Isle?"

"For sure," Carlos nodded, though he looked a little overwhelmed. "It'd probably be a little similar to what Doug's been working on at the palace, right?"

"Right," Mal agreed. "Just a little bigger." She wrapped Malice up a little tighter and sighed dramatically as Ben turned his head to peer down at the little girl. He still looked amazed as his eyes flicked back and forth between her and her sister.

"I can't get used to this," He laughed.

Mal rolled her eyes. "You will," She declared. She looked down to watch the little girl breathe in and out, and then heard footsteps behind her. Heavy footsteps with metal clanking as the person walked. She turned around.

"Heading back to Auradon?" A man asked, stepping forward a little. There were no lights on the beach and the natural light was vanishing quickly, but Mal could still hear Ben take a breath and felt him straighten up.

"Oh! Um, dad, I mean..." He trailed off, stumbling over every sentence, and Mal winced internally on his behalf.
"Hades," She corrected Ben carefully, glancing over her shoulder to watch her friends all take cautious looks at each other. Audrey looked a little pale, but she was straightening up, not slinking away. Only Evie had known that Hades was her dad, but she supposed that secret was out now.

"Who's that?" Hades asked, furrowing his brow and nodding to Malice.

"Mom's new daughter," Mal explained. "Daughter of Maleficent and Jafar." She brushed her hair back and watched Hades's hair burst into fire, lighting the area a bit more. Ben took another breath.

Hades stepped forward to compare Mal and Malice and then nodded in acceptance. "Wonder if he's surviving her crazy now," He laughed. "Watch out - people will think she's yours."

Jay, Carlos, Evie, Lonnie, and Ben all nodded in agreement to this statement. Mal sighed. "At least she doesn't look like Ben." She stepped sideways so Ben couldn't hide behind her as well. "Oh, and by the way, this is Ben, the King of Auradon and my husband."

Ben started holding his breath as he took a little step forward to stand by her side. 'Don't try and give him a speech about taking care of me,' she begged him mentally. Hades tilted his head back, angling the flames so he could examine Ben's face. "Prince Charming?" He asked. Mal flinched internally.

"Pleased to meet you," Ben inclined his head.

Hades hummed. "I know he sheds, but can he growl?" He gave a little demonic growl to demonstrate as Ben's face turned beet-red and he sent a scathing look to Mal, probably cursing her for exposing that to Auradon.

"No," he tried to deny as Mal opened her mouth to say: "Only if I kiss him weird," Immediately, Ben's face exploded into a red so violent it almost became purple. Jay and Carlos wrinkled their noses up a bit and Hades didn't look too accepting of the comment either. Mal, meanwhile, paused to toy with the idea. What could she do to make Ben growl?

"Mal!" Ben bumped her arm a little, trying to urge her to take it back.

Mal rolled her eyes and shifted the baby in her arms. "It's true. Besides, Ben, he made me. He knows how it is."

She'd pay for that comment later, she knew, because Ben didn't like any bad implications about their relationship and embarrassing him in front of her dad was a one-way ticket to the lake of fire and brimstone in his book. Even now, he was glaring two sizzling holes into her skin, practically screaming at her to take it all back. Surprisingly though, it was Hades who moved to silence her.

"That's enough," He declared softly, narrowing his eyes between the two of them. "Now, listen Mallie, I have a special place in the Underworld for this fool when he dies. If you would like to keep him here longer, don't ever give me a response like that again."

"Dad, come on," Mal rolled her eyes. "It's just a joke. You've seen my interviews. I like to tease him."

Hades frowned. The fire in his hair dimmed. "Well," He sighed, seemingly deciding to put it behind him. "I'm sure you two will be very happy together."

"We will be," Ben agreed, still not meeting Hades's eyes. "We are." He reached around Mal to put a hand on Malice's head.
"All aboard!" The captain yelled from the boat deck, sending a pointed glance towards the Queen and her entourage.

Mal sighed. "Bye, Dad," She whispered, leaning up to kiss his cheek and then turned to the boat. She heard Ben stumbling a little more over his words before the two important men in her life managed a handshake. Hades stood on the deck with Audrey and watched them all board the boat.

"You sure you don't want to come back?" Ben asked, examining Audrey as he stood on the bottom of the gangplank. She looked very different, with dirt and grime in her hair, smudged makeup, and a cut on her knee.

"No thanks." Audrey wrinkled her nose, still clutching her sword tightly - the same sword she'd used to break the underground door open and save Mal's life with. "But can you let my mom know I'm good? Maybe I'll go back tomorrow. Maybe."

Ben examined his old girlfriend. Something really was different about her. It was… cool. "Stay safe." He said. "We'll see you tomorrow." He boarded the ship and soon, they had disembarked from the Isle of the Lost.

"So, you have a sister," Ben began, sitting down beside Mal on the ship as she curled into a chair.

"I have a sister," Mal affirmed. "She, uh, even has the mark of Maleficent."

"On her shoulder?" Ben asked, putting his hand on the shoulder where Mal's own mark lay. Mal nodded.

Carlos furrowed his brow. "The what?" He asked.

Mal blinked slowly, and then turned her shoulder to him and slipped the sleeve down. Jay's eyes bugged out at the dragon, even though he knew she'd had it. "I have the mark of my mother," Mal explained, tracing it with a finger. "I think I was born with it, but I'm not sure. She might have tattooed it on herself." Ben reached forward and began tracing it softly. Jay watched the action from across the deck.

"You knew about it?" Jay asked gruffly. Mal glanced at him tersely but said nothing.

"Yeah," Ben nodded as he pretended to not notice the tension between Mal and her old friend. "She told me about it and let me see it on our honeymoon. I still think it looks cool." He brushed her sleeve back into place and let her lean back into his shoulder.

The ship passed through the leaflet barrier to enter international waters and woke the baby with a squawk. She started to whimper a little as Mal moved her to lay on her legs. Ben looked over Mal's shoulder as Mal put the tip of her finger in the baby's mouth for her to suck on until they got to Auradon. He was absolutely enchanted by the tiny girl. Little Malice had the greenest eyes he'd ever seen on anyone besides Mal. Her hair curled naturally down a high forehead, and she had porcelain skin, untouched by freckles.

"She's pretty darn cute," Lonnie chuckled, jumping up on the barrier of the ship and glancing between the baby and the ocean foam being battered against the hull of the ship. "Beautiful baby."

Ben sighed and nodded ecstatically in response. "Now can I hold her?" He begged.

"She's my sister." Mal pinched her lips together as she shuffled the baby away.

"Exactly!" Ben agreed. "You're going to get to hold her all the time, so – please?"
Mal sighed begrudgingly and handed little Malice to Ben. Ben, mindful of her head, took her carefully and put her on top of his legs as the small girl stared up curiously at the newcomer.

"Hello!" Ben whispered with a bright smile. "You're so small!" He marveled. "How old are you?"

"We don't know," Mal supplied. "Probably a few days old. See how her skin is flaking off a little?" She laid her head on Ben's shoulder and set her hand on his knee. "Do you like her?"

"I do," Ben affirmed, kissing Mal's head. "Not as much as I like you, though. Why?"

"Just making sure," Mal shrugged. She reached forward and brushed Malice's hair aside.

Ben squeezed Mal close to his side. "Are we adopting her?" He asked.

Mal choked a little. "I, um, don't know," She admitted. "I don't think it's a good idea because I'm not ready, but I haven't decided. I want some more time to think about it."

"I wouldn't mind adopting her," Ben informed Mal, smiling down at the baby. "Just in advance, if you decide that's what you want to do. You know I'll approve no matter what, right?" Mal nodded with some unease as Ben continued smiling at Malice. After a few seconds, Ben started talking again. "So, her dad…" Ben trailed off as he slipped his pinky finger into Malice's little grasp, where she waved it in amazement. "Is Jafar?" He finished.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. Malice released Ben's finger and went back to clenching her fists. It'd be a little while longer before she learned to make grabby motions with her hands and stretch her hands out.

"She doesn't look much like Jafar," Ben commented, tilting his head to each side.

"It's subtle." Mal agreed. "She looks more like Mom and I. But see, her nose is a little wider than mine, and her facial structure is more oval than moms. She'll probably have a longer face as she gets older. And her ears are connected instead of free. See?"

Ben nodded as she pointed at each feature as she spoke, occasionally glancing up to examine and compare Mal's features to her sister's.

Carlos leaned back into the chair he was sitting in and yawned, and then stood up. "I'm going to walk around before I fall asleep," he informed them. "Be right back." Jay and Evie remained sitting nearby. Jay was twiddling his fingers in his lap, but Evie was sitting, staring out at the open water with a hostile expression. Ben observed them both briefly, then returned his eyes to the tiny girl in his arms.

"So." He started abruptly. Mal's head snapped up and he met her eyes. "Let's say… Jafar wasn't her dad."

Mal crinkled her nose. "I'm pretty sure he is, but for the sake of your point, go on."

"Let's say if I was her dad…" Ben started.

"Gross," Mal said automatically, shoving him a little. "You realize Maleficent is your mother-in-law, right?"

"And you were her mom." Ben amended. Mal's head snapped back up. She stared at him in surprise and with more than a little unease. Ben didn't look at her as he smiled at Malice. "What do you think she'd look like?" He asked. Mal let out a little breath and relaxed against his arm. He wasn't
fooled by her act of ease, but the question wasn't supposed to mean anything.

Mal looked down at her little sister and a soft smile spread across her face like she was having a wonderful dream, but her eyes were wide open. She drew a soft hand down Malice's cheek, who gurgled and blew small bubbles from her lips as she raised a tiny fist triumphant over her head. "She'd probably be about the same size." Mal hummed in thought. "And her nose and mouth would be a little wider. Her chin would go in a little more, and her eyes wouldn't be as deep-set." She looked back up at Ben. A small cloud of fog appeared in front of her face as she let out a short breath.

Ben hated to break the moment, but he shrugged. "I'm not trying to insinuate anything." He told Mal. She nodded like she'd known all along. "I do not expect you to have children before you're, like, twenty-five." Mal burst into laughter. "And I know you're busy." Ben continued.

"Hush," Mal commanded. "I get it. And you know I'm not interested. Now hush."

Ben shut his mouth as Mal leaned forward and combed her fingers through Malice's purple locks. Across the deck, Evie stood abruptly and walked to the stern of the ship. Ben and Mal watched her go, heels clicking all the way. Ben took Mal's hands. "She's upset." He whispered. "You should go talk to her." Mal exhaled with a small grumble.

"She'll have to get over it one day," She sighed. Mal nodded and pressed a quick kiss to Malice's hand before she stood up and hurried away after Evie. In just a few seconds, it was Jay and Ben left alone on the bow of the ship with Lonnie wandering up and down the rigging several meters away. Jay shifted uncomfortably. Ben wondered if he should be worried. After all, the last time he'd been alone with Jay, Jay had punched him in the lip.

"Have you decided to apply for school, Jay?" Ben asked.

Jay remained silent for several seconds before he coughed and sat up straight. "Yeah." He said softly. "I was hoping to. Are you sure the palace is okay with helping pay fees, or should I start looking for work?"

"Well, of course, you should start looking for work, but the palace will still support you, Jay. We won't throw you out into Auradon without helping you as much as we can." Ben said. Malice yawned and stretched her hands above her forehead, resting them on top of her head and closing her eyes. Ben chuckled and missed the way Jay sniffled.

"You guys' kids are going to be cute," Jay mumbled.

Ben smiled and lifted up his shoulders a little. "I know. I hope they look more like Mal than me though." He moved Malice into his arms and let her curl into his chest.

"Ben," Jay called for his attention. His throat sounded like it was about to close up.

"Yeah, Jay?" Ben asked.

"I, um, I want to get this off my chest… I bet Mal will tell you eventually, but I want you to know about it so… I don't know." Jay rubbed his hands all over his face like he wasn't sure what to do with them and was trying to resist the urge to hide.

"Shoot," Ben replied as he straightened up and focused on Jay. This must be why Mal had been so tense around him the last few hours.

"I kissed Mal," Jay admitted. For several seconds, the words didn't quite register with Ben, and
then he looked up with a furrowed brow. A cloud of confusion set over him as Jay continued. "Yesterday, when we told her that you were gone. She started crying and... see, when I was younger I kind of figured I'd either be alone forever or that she and I would eventually just be each other's partners, and I had this moment of realization where I realized that... she wasn't going to come back to get my help this time." Jay dropped his hands to his lap and began to shake as tears filled his eyes. "I know she's... totally into you, totally into this. She doesn't need me to watch her back because she's got you. We're not... going to be the same invincible pair we were before, and it really hurt to think I wasn't going to be as close to her as I used to be. So, I gave her my first kiss because that's where I always figured it would go. She's pissed at me and I don't know yet how much of our relationship I threw away, but I tried so hard..." His voice cracked.

Ben wasn't sure how to react. His hands felt a little numb, his heart was beating a little fast, and he'd be lying if he said he wasn't a little angry, but he still had his head screwed on right. "Okay." He shrugged and looked back down at Malice. "I'm going to wait and see if Mal will tell me about it. I'm pretty confident in her though, and even if she does decide to leave, I just want her to be happy." Did the thought drive knives through him? Absolutely. But if it was her happiness at stake, could he do it? Absolutely.

"You're okay with that?" Jay asked, wiping his eyes and sitting up.

Ben shrugged. "Okay with it... that's a strong way of putting it. I mean, I get the feeling it was a one-time vibe. If you're going to plan on it a lot, I mean, that's a little more than weird, but hey – we do crazy things when we're sad or scared."

"It was a one-time thing," Jay confirmed. Mal would kill him if he tried it again. "I'm sorry for kissing your wife."

"Did she kiss you back?" Ben asked casually. His heart picked up a beat at the question.

"No." Jay sighed and shook his head. "She stayed all still for, like, two seconds before she realized what was happening and started pushing me back. Then she snapped at me for it."

Ben nodded along to Jay's words. "Okay," He acknowledged. A laugh bubbled up inside him, though he wasn't really sure why. Maybe it was just the tenseness of the situation "She's a good kisser, man. You should have drawn it out a bit."

"She would have killed me on the spot." Jay laughed. His eyes were beginning to dry. "She loves you, man."

Ben drummed his fingers on his leg and exhaled. "I'm not going to do or say anything about it because she's already got the situation covered, and she knows what she wants and she doesn't need me going and taking over for her. But, uh, don't do it again, please. She gets the first say on where her lips go."

Jay nodded forlornly. "I got it," He whispered. "Thanks for looking out for her when I wasn't around. I can't imagine if she'd ended up with that guy who grabbed her on TV. Just... don't go breaking her heart."

Ben smiled. He took Malice's tiny hands and brought them down from her head. "Never." He told Jay. Then, he bent down and kissed Malice on the forehead. "Night-night," He whispered. She let out a colossal yawn and went right to sleep. Ben carefully examined her features and imagined a different child in an older Mal's arms, with more of her features and a couple of his. His heart opened. 'One day,' he promised himself. 'That'll be us. And boy, I can't wait.'
I do not own Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, 101 Dalmanations, Aladdin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Mulan, The Little Mermaid, Peter Pan, Cinderella, or The Incredibles.
Chapter Summary

The group returns to the palace. Belle and Adam resolve to adopt Malice(Later christened Madison). Ben and Mal make love for the first time(Not explicitly pictured). Evie, Jay, and Carlos leave for Auradon Prep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Back at the castle, Belle was waiting for them in the garage. When they opened the door and waved goodbye to Stewart inside his limo as he pulled away, she looked up with a frown and a stern expression. Ben gulped and froze under his mother's gaze as everyone paused behind him. Mal felt ice creep into her spine.

Belle scraped something black from underneath her nails. "I thought you would be back yesterday," She said primly. Her lips pressed into a thin line. "The Fairy Godmother called to say the barrier over the Isle of the Lost had been broken, Peter Pan appeared from Neverland for the first time in almost forty years to take the Jolly Roger back to Neverland, Aurora has called nineteen times to ask if Audrey has returned, and a dragon was visible over the Isle from Auradon. All I can say is that your excuse had better be good." Belle folded her hands in her lap and pinched her lips as she cast her eyes about the group.

Mal shuffled forward. Belle's eyes fell on Malice and her mouth formed a little: 'O'. She looked up at Mal in wonder. "Did you bring me a grandchild?" She asked. Ben stepped forward to support Mal as his wife's eyes grew large.

"No!" Mal hurried. "This is, um, my little sister. She's brand-new, and my mom is in this bag right here." Mal held up the drawstring bag that they'd put Lizard Maleficent in. "Ben was captured by Gaston and Dr. Facilier on the island." She explained. "They wanted the Fairy Godmother's wand to bring down the barrier, I made a deal with them and brought it down from the inside by myself because I was stupid enough to think I'd be able to be faster than everyone else on the ship, and then mom turned into a dragon and we all almost died."

"I see," Belle replied in a flat tone. Her eyes flickered down to Malice in Mal's arms. "Where's Audrey?"

"She asked to stay another night," Mal explained.

Belle examined each of the young adults. She held out her arms. "I'll forgive you all if you give me the baby." She decided. "What's her name?"

"Malice, but I think she needs a new one," Mal explained as she walked forward and carefully put the baby in Belle's arms. Belle's entire face lit up as she studied the girl's tiny hands and mouth.

"She's so cute!" Belle squealed softly. She wrapped the baby in her arms expertly and began to walk away.
"Wait, where are you going with her?" Mal asked as she followed Belle out of the garage. Everyone trailed along behind her.

"I'm going to introduce her to Adam and we are going to be her foster parents." Belle decided. Ben's face wrinkled up a little in disappointment and offense.

Mal blinked. "Um, just like that?" She asked.

"We'll file some paperwork to adopt her and name her," Belle said passively. "You're queen anyway. This way, I'm not bored, and I get another child, which is something I always wanted."

Mal stopped in the hallway and Ben bumped into her before he put an arm around her shoulder. "You wanted more kids?" She asked.

"Yes." Belle nodded. "But we didn't for a variety of reasons. For one, most royals generally only have one child so there's no power struggle if the younger ones want the throne. Also, being queen was pretty tough, as I'm sure you know. Even with Adam as my partner, there wasn't a lot of time. But now I'm old and I will adopt this small child and she will be happy with us." Belle slipped through a door into the main palace sector.

Mal rubbed her hands over her arms, which were now covered in goosebumps. She looked up at Ben, who seemed to understand with only a glance. He reached forward and grabbed his mom's arm.

"Hey, Mom?" He asked. "I get this is your dream, but this is also Mal's sister. I, for one, would like to consider adopting her myself. Can she and I have a conversation about it before you make any decisions?"

"Okay." Belle wilted a little but smiled still when she looked down at the child. "You still need to see your father, young man. He's up in your office finishing up things for you."

Ben tensed up like a live wire. "Finishing things for me?" He repeated tersely.

Belle raised her eyebrows. "Is that a problem?" She wondered.

"Can I have her back…?" Mal asked hesitantly. She looked a little tense, even though Belle clearly had experience with small children and Malice was still fast asleep against her chest. Ben took a deep breath beside her.

Belle carefully put Malice back in Mal's grasp, even though she looked sad to see the girl go back to her sister. Mal sighed in soft relief as soon as she had the girl back in her arms. "Thank you." She told Belle, carefully nuzzling Malice's cheek. Belle smiled and clasped her hands together.

"Yes, alright." She smiled. "Let's go see Adam then." Belle began to lead the group up the stairs. Jay, Evie, and Carlos slipped around Ben and Mal as they inched closer together. Belle waited at the end of the hallway, but Ben waved her ahead. "We'll catch up." He promised, though he still looked anxious about his dad being in his office.

The group disappeared.

Mal turned towards Ben with a gentle exhale as she held Malice right up next to her shoulders. "I'm sorry." She whispered. "I love your mom. I just… never had a sister before. I wasn't expecting her to walk off with her so soon."

"It's okay," Ben whispered. He put his arm around Mal and curled her up to his side. "I panicked"
when she started walking away too." He watched as she wrapped her arms tightly around the baby and as she smiled and relaxed under his grasp. "You're pretty amazing, you know?" He whispered. "Just today, you were holding on to a ship with your knees, throwing swords to cut us free from the dock, healing your worst enemy, and now you're sitting here, blown away by the idea of a sister."

Mal leaned her head against Ben's chest. "What would have happened to her if she'd stayed with mom?" She whispered. "Or if I'd never become queen at all, and you'd only have made me a puppet queen without any sway at all?"

Ben bit his lip. "I read your blessing a few months ago," He whispered. "And there was a line that... I couldn't make sense of at the time." He brought his hand up from her shoulder and ran his fingers through his hair. "'Your strong relationship with your husband will one day be your greatest achievement. Your fondest memories will be forged with your new family in Auradon.' And, I thought, will I still be that husband for her? She might marry some other guy once the curse is broken. And this family, is it talking about me and my parents? Or is there any small chance that one day, she and I-" Ben turned and looked into Mal's eyes as she looked up. Her cheeks turned a dusty pink.

"We have time. But the point of this pep talk was that you have a family. You've forged your own family here. Evie, and Jay, and Carlos, wherever they go, will always be your family. Mom and Dad are parents to you too. I am meant to be more than a puppet ruler over the moors and the Isle. I'm here for a confidant, a supporter, a partner. And now, you have your sister. You're not going to lose her. Whether you let Mom and Dad adopt her or whether you keep her with you and bring her back and forth to the moors and to the Isle, she will always be your sister. Okay?" Ben finished his speech.

Mal chuckled. "You're a little too over-the-top." She told him, then sighed. "I know." She sighed. "I think I'll ask Belle if she'd like to adopt her. She can be raised a princess of Auradon, and hopefully, I can pick up on how Belle parents, so I don't have to figure everything out by myself if we ever have a kid."

"If?" Ben asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Give me some time." She rolled her eyes and then paused. "Unless you plan on leaving me?" Mal asked. She gave him a nervous smile.

Ben wrapped his arm around her tightly and kissed the top of her head. "Never." He promised her.

Mal laughed, closing her eyes against his chest and burying her face in his chest. "Ben... I meant what I said on the Isle."

Ben loosened his grip and began to trace little circles on her arm. "On the ship, or on the beach?" He asked for clarification.

"On the beach," Mal clarified. "Right before we went into the city." She put her hand on his knee. "I think I'm ready for you, now."

Ben moved his other hand to be on top of hers and hummed in thought. "I don't know if that's something we should be doing without protection if you don't think you're ready for kids. We've got to take this one step at a time."

Mal hummed in neither agreement or disagreement as he rubbed the knuckles in her hands a little. She watched as he lifted her hand up in his palm, brought it to his mouth, and kissed the back of it before standing up and helping her to her feet. "Now, let's catch up." He mumbled against her hair.
They both turned and continued following Belle's group up to Ben's office.

Ben's desk was messier than it had been before he'd left, even though Adam had only gone through completing paperwork and filing things as they came in. Several things he needed to sign and approve were stacked in a heap beside the keyboard and Adam had continued pulling pens out of Ben's mug without putting them back until most of them were scattered in between stacked papers and hidden beside notepads and the mug was only half-filled. Mal walked in first, then turned to watch Ben's lips pinch together in disappointment as he took in the rest of the mess. Adam was sitting in Ben's chair, and Belle was standing beside him. Mal's friends had all taken seats along the outside of the room and looked to be trying hard to stay awake.

Adam turned to greet the two as they walked in and his mouth fell open at the sight of Malice in her older sister's arms. "Wha- how?" He sputtered.

Ben made a thumb to one of the chairs alongside the room, looking a little white. "Nice to see you too, Dad. Can you please get out of my chair?"

Adam stood up slowly and, instead of taking a different chair, leaned forward to gape at Malice. "Where'd she come from?" He demanded.

"This is Malice, my little sister," Mal explained slowly, stepping forward a little so that Adam could see the tell-tale purple hair spilling out from around the girl's head. "She's a daughter of Maleficent and Jafar. And, uh, my mom is in the bag on my arm, in lizard form." She tried to move her arm so that Adam could see the bag without jostling Malice.

"Sister," Adam repeated, craning his head to look at the bag on Mal's arm. "Oh, I-I see." He ran a hand down his face and stepped out from behind Ben's desk, giving Ben enough space to step in and began sweeping things into neater piles. He slipped all the forms Adam had left out for him into the second drawer in his desk for the next day and began gathering pens. Already, his space looked more... him. "I was trying to figure out... I mean, she looked just like you when you walked in and you were holding her..."

"I'm not her mom," Mal shook her head with pink cheeks. "Malice, my sister."

"I want to adopt her," Belle announced to Adam. "I always wanted a girl. She can grow up with us and that way we'll have a daughter and a daughter-in-law from the same family."

"Belle, we haven't had a baby in twenty-two years." Adam reminded her, blinking and looking very shell-shocked by the entire experience.

"Well, eighteen, really," Belle hummed, leaning over to ruffle Ben's hair as he continued pulling sticky notes with detailed accounts of phone calls that had come in throughout the day off of his desk and putting them underneath his screen. Ben made a face and ducked away from her touch a little as he capped a highlighter that had been left to dry out and dropped it into his trash can. "But really, Ben's always going to be my baby."

"Thanks, mom," Ben sighed. He pushed his chair out and bent down to make sure there wasn't anything under his desk.

Adam watched his son feel around underneath the desk. "Now, really, Ben. Don't you think that's a bit excessive?"

Ben came back up with five different papers crumpled in his hands and quickly smoothed them out to examine them before dropping them into the trash. "I can't leave my kingdom with anyone," He
sighed. "How did you make such a mess in one day, Dad?"

"Some of it was already here," Adam began, but Ben looked up with a raised eyebrow and the former king gave up on his excuse before it was fully formed. He turned back to Belle instead. "So, you want to adopt the other daughter of Maleficent?" He asked. Mal wrinkled her nose in hurt. The other daughter of Maleficent sounded like a particularly unfavorable title; as if the first had been a torturous experience. Ben, too, balked at the description and Evie, Jay, and Carlos all blinked in surprise.

Belle observed the reaction with tight lips and then corrected her husband: "Mal's sister, dear. Just say 'Mal's sister' next time. And yes, I want to adopt her."

Adam glanced to Mal. "Is that okay with you?" He asked.

Mal swallowed with her arms tight around Malice. "I... I think so. I mean, you guys did great with Ben, so I'd trust you with her."

Adam laughed, loud and boisterous, as Ben rolled his eyes and turned his attention to his desktop, where dozens of tabs and applications were open. "Dad, you don't need five different streaming services open at once," Ben sighed as he began to click through the various pages.

"So, the daughter of Maleficent and Jafar?" Adam asked, stepping forward and putting a hand on Mal's shoulder. Mal nodded cautiously, and then Adam pointed across the room to Jay. "Aren't you the son of Jafar? And you're older than Mal, so shouldn't you get the first say what happens to your little sister?"

Jay looked like he'd swallowed a jar of hot coals. "Um, I don't know anything about kids." He gasped and hurried to find an excuse. "And Mal's queen and she probably needs the prac- I mean- no, I don't want to raise her. I'd be happy to just see her from time to time."

Adam nodded in understanding and then put his hand on Malice's head. "Are you sure that you wouldn't want to raise her, Mal?" He asked, meeting his daughter-in-law's eyes. "Ben's children have priority over the throne of Auradon and he's supposed to sire an heir, but she could still be a Princess of the Moorlands or of the Isle."

The room felt incredibly tense. Mal could feel something in the air as physical as if it were freezing on her skin like Isle air. Two countries were directly depending on her, and giving Malice up would mean she was holding out on them for an heir to their lands. Assuming, of course, the Isle stayed an inherited monarchy. Still, something in her gut told her that it wasn't right to try and take this on quite yet.

"I don't think I'm ready for children yet," Mal mumbled, looking past Adam and at Ben. "I mean, I don't know about Ben, but that's-" She heaved a sigh, "a huge responsibility I don't quite have the time or the preparation for yet."

Adam turned around to his son, whose expression was mostly masked. "What do you say, Ben?" He asked.

Ben held up his hands in defense. "This is Mal's decision," He rebutted. "I don't get a say in her sister and her two kingdoms. This is all on her and I will support her either way. Whether Malice gets a place as my sister or my daughter, I am going to stand with her every step of the way."

"Do you want to raise her?" Mal asked, shifting her weight from foot to foot anxiously.

Ben let a dreamy little smile slip onto his face as he stared at Malice. "I'd be more than happy to."
He admitted. "She's a great little girl. A little you. I'd love to raise her. But I'd also love to just watch her grow and it's more important to me that you're comfortable with your choice." He put his hands into his pockets. "I'm ready for kids when you are, but if you're not, then I don't want them. You make your decision, and your decision will be mine."

Mal nodded and closed her eyes, exhaling. "I... don't think I'm ready yet," She decided. "I think it's probably better to give her to someone else." She loosened her arms and Adam held his hands out to take the small child from her. She forced herself to let the small child go and, with her, felt a weight lift from her shoulders. Adam balanced Malice carefully in his hands and Belle stepped forward to loop her arm through his and peer down at her new baby girl. Ben's sister.

Mal chewed on her lower lip anxiously and glanced at Ben, standing behind his desk. He held out an arm for her. "Come here, you," he laughed. Mal hesitantly slipped around her mother and father-in-law and underneath his arm as he curled it around her side.

"Are you disappointed?" She mumbled, watching Belle smile and examine Malice's features. Ben laughed.

"Do you really think I'd give that whole speech and then be disappointed you didn't give me parental rights over your sister?" He rolled his eyes. "No, no, I'm proud of you. Good job. And you know, when the time is right for you, it'll be right for me too. Okay?"

Mal nodded in agreement, and Ben uncurled his arm from around her. "Now," he began, taking a deep breath, "Dad, where did you go in my office?"

Adam chuckled. "I think you got all of the mess, son." He told Ben. "I was mostly taking calls and sorting through things that came in."

"No, where did you go?" Ben repeated firmly. "I need to know every cabinet you opened." The specific, brutal tone of his voice conveyed exactly how important it was. Adam's smile faded a little.

"I opened your top desk drawer and the last one looking for some cords," Adam began, walking over to gesture to the drawers. "Then, I opened all the drawers in your filing cabinet there while I was sorting things, and then that closet beside the door." He nodded to each place as he spoke.

Ben's mouth pressed into a thin line. He strode over to the cabinet and opened it before gesturing to his dad to come over. Adam frowned. "I was only grabbing extra paper and paperclips. And I opened that little drawer for index cards."

"Nothing else?" Ben prompted.

"What is this about?" Adam frowned. "Is there something I was supposed to be avoiding?"

"Nothing else?" Ben repeated, voice growing even firmer than before.

"Nothing," Adam agreed. Ben shut the cabinet, relaxing with a small sigh.

"Ben?" Belle asked, furrowing her brow. "Is there something you need to tell us?"

"No," Ben shook his head. "Nothing I can tell you. I have-" he paused, unzipping his Isle jacket and peeling it off his arms to hang up on a hook beside the door, "National Secrets in that cupboard. Things I'm going to be moving, now." He went to his desk and found a ring of keys in the topmost drawer.
"Well, it's nothing I haven't seen before," Adam shrugged. "The country hasn't changed much in the last year."

"Yes, it has," Ben disagreed, flipping through keys and then walking back to the cupboard to lock it. "And those things are mine, for my eyes only until they're done."

"What about Mal?" Carlos asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

Mal shook her head before Ben could answer. "No," She sighed dramatically. "Ben's 'National Security' is for leaders of Auradon. I'm not a leader, even though I'm Queen. So Ben's new laws aren't for my eyes."

"New laws?" Adam asked, glancing at Ben, who sent a grave look to Mal, indicating he wished she hadn't listed any specifics.

"Things I'm fixing," Ben admitted. "Things I'm making better. Old classified files that I'm considering releasing, new things that are going on around the country, and especially things going on in international territories."

Adam's brow knit tighter and tighter together as Ben listed some vague specifics, and then turned to put Malice in Belle's arms. Belle took her carefully, looking a bit hurt by Ben's overly direct tone. "Fixing?" Adam asked. "Making better?"

Mal watched Ben swallow and take a deep breath, and stood up a little straighter behind the desk. "It's not for you to know yet," Ben reminded his dad. "This is for me and a few distant advisors. When I tell the kingdom, I'll tell you beforehand."

"You're changing the laws on magic!" Adam accused, face growing red. "Aren't you?"

Mal blinked in surprise at the sudden accusation. She knew Ben was planning on drawing new borders with the Isle of the Lost - that was the paper he'd shown her at the table about a week ago - but removing the laws against magic was mostly her dream that Ben supported. She stared at him in surprise and watched his ears turn a little pink. "No!" He sputtered, then flinched. "Well, I'm... considering things, but - come on, dad, you know they're not right!"

"How long has this been going on?" Adam demanded, curling his hands into fists. "Don't you remember our tale? Our entire castle was cursed for ten years by an enchantress. Do you want to open our lands up to that again?"

"It's only been going for... It's not even really going... It's-" Ben trailed off, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. Mal moved out from behind the desk and went to stand beside him, putting her hands in her pockets until she was at his side. Then she held out a hand and he took it with a steady breath. "I've never liked them," Ben admitted. "Even when I was younger. I think you were wrong to instigate them. I've been researching for months and talking with dozens of different people and you've severely damaged our magical communities and hurt international relations with these laws. That's the real reason Elsa wanted to come down to the palace. They have to go in one form or another. Your tale happened because you were acting cruelly. You blamed magic, and that's wrong. So yes, that's one of the things in there. You may not know the rest."

"How could you keep this from us?" Belle frowned, sticking her lip out a small fraction. "We put those laws up; we could advise you on-"

"It's not your place," Ben repeated. "You put up the laws - I know you would be unfairly biased against the changes. There's a reason I haven't consulted Mal much either - she's unfairly biased
towards the changes. The fact is, though, that I'm looking at the bigger picture, and I'm going to keep trying to make Auradon better." He exhaled and shook his head to clear it. "I won't say another word on it, though. All you need to know is that the things in that cupboard are for my eyes only. Thank you for looking after my kingdom today, dad, but we did more than just change crowns. This isn't the same Auradon you ruled over, and it's my place alone to lead them. Not Mom's, not yours, not even Mal's." He squeezed Mal's hand tightly.

Adam looked like he was about to explode and Belle looked very unsure of the situation. She chewed on her cheek as her eyes flitted back and forth between Ben and Mal. "Are you sure you're actually thinking about the kingdom, and not just about, well..." She trailed off.

Ben cocked his head to the side. "The fact my wife is a magical person herself?" He asked. Belle hesitated and nodded slowly. Ben shook his head. "I had ideas to fix these laws back when I was ten - long before Mal came into the picture. And yes, I'll have to work with her to make sure that we draft laws where magics can't go around punishing people for small things, but this is something important that has to change. By the way," He turned to Mal. "I need your help on a few things that you won't be able to talk about with other people, regarding magic in Auradon."

"You'll consult Mal and not us?" Adam demanded. "You just said she was a biased source! We're your parents, Ben."

Ben stared at his dad and then put his other hand atop Mal's. "Mal is my wife," He reminded them in a slow tone. "She and I are partners. And she's the Queen of the Moorlands. She's had practice working with spells and looking for spell loopholes. I'm not going to let her help me draft laws, but I'm sure as heck going to make sure there aren't any magic loopholes people can jump through. Why wouldn't I consult her on that?"

"But why not us?" Belle frowned. "We're all family here, Ben."

Ben shook his head. "Family is important, and I love you guys a lot, but again, Mal is my wife. Dad, you can't honestly look me in the eyes and tell me you that I'm equal to mom in your sight, can you? Sure, I know you love me, but she's your partner, and Mal is mine. We're all family, but she's also my future."

Silence hung in the air. Belle's eyes were filling with shocked tears. Mal kept her palm tightly in Ben's, reeling over what she'd just heard. She could be mistaken, but she was pretty sure Ben had just told his parents that he loved her more than them. In nicer terms, of course, but there was only so many ways you could spin 'she's also my future'. Also, as in 'Mom, Dad, you don't fit into this category anymore.'

Ben held the keys aloft. "This stays locked," He announced. "I will arrest anyone who tries to sneak in and read stuff, before or after I move it all." He paused to let go of Mal's hand and run his fingertips down her jaw. His touch was soft above her neck. "Even you," he clarified with a little laugh. Mal let a little smile ghost onto her face and then stared silently at the floor, refusing to meet her in-law's faces. Ben returned the keys to his desk and then opened the door for everyone to filter out. "Come on," he commanded. "It's time for this day to be over."

Later that night, Mal and Sophia sat on the floor, fiddling with the glass terrarium Sophia had found from back in Ben's childhood when he'd had a gecko. It had died of old age and natural causes. As Mal fiddled with the lightbulb that would keep her cold-blooded mom warm, Ben paced behind them and brushed his teeth. Both he and Mal were already dressed in their pajamas. When the bright light flickered to life, Sophia and Mal let out a little cheer.
"What's been going on with you and Stewart?" Mal asked as she fiddled with attaching the light to the terrarium.

"I met his parents," Sophia admitted with a blush. "They're super sweet. I dropped sugar in his dad's lap when I was walking with it back to the kitchen, and they made jokes about it for the rest of the evening. They're calling me 'sugar-stopper'."

Mal giggled. "Good thing Belle and Adam didn't do that to me. "I'd be called 'glitter-bomb', or 'dust-buster'."

Ben almost spit out a mouthful of foamy toothpaste as he choked back a laugh behind them and hurried back to the bathroom as Sophia and Mal laughed together.

They laughed and put the terrarium on a side table where Maleficent would have a view of the whole room. Mal picked up the bag where Maleficent had been put for the day, and carefully overturned it. She picked her mom up around the lizard's belly and put her in the terrarium. Maleficent trudged slowly over to the heat lamp, and sat down, shivering. Mal frowned. Maleficent didn't seem to look that good.

"I'm going to take my leave now, Mal." Sophia smiled as she gathered up the terrarium packaging and tucked it under her arm. The two girls exchanged a quick hug.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Sophia!" Mal said as she showed her to the door.

"Yes, assuming you don't leave straightaway!" Sophia laughed as she opened the door with her foot.

"I won't," Mal promised through her giggles. "Now, goodnight!"

"Goodnight!" Sophia called as the door swung closed between them.

Mal let her hand rest on the door for a few seconds as a soft smile spread across her face. She reached down and clicked the lock shut before she turned around and examined the room. Mal checked the lid on the terrarium and wandered into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and used the bathroom before she went into the bedroom. Ben was awake and scrolling through his phone with the covers over his legs. "It's so nice to be home." He sighed without looking up.

Mal giggled. "Aw, so you didn't like sleeping tied to the ship?" Mal chuckled.

Ben shook his head. "No thank you." He said with a laugh, then held his phone out to her. She leaned over and skinned the screen. A new post of the palace website under his name: "Some people think their mother-in-laws are overbearing and misinformed. Mine, however, is a literal dragon to deal with."

Mal laughed at the joke and watched him roll his eyes and pull his phone back to himself. He continued scrolling, catching up on the news he'd missed out on the day before. Mal went to him and climbed into bed at his side. She wrapped her arm through his and used it to pull herself closer to him as he chuckled and turned off his phone. She hugged her chest to his biceps so it was harder for him to move as he flipped out the light and then turned to face her.

"You're needy." He told her as he pulled his arm out of her grasp and instead wrapped his arms around her like he was a large, warm, sweat-scented blanket. She sank into his warm grip with a contented sigh as one of his hands began to trace a gentle pattern on her back. A hot, burning feeling was growing in her stomach.
"I want you." She whispered, tracing a finger down his collarbone. "Do you want me, now?" She shivered as his movements against her grew precise and careful.

There was a full moon outside, so light filtered in through the closed window. She could see the gentle smirk that pulled at Ben's lips. "Yes," He admitted. "I do want you." He cupped his hands at her hips, pulling her even closer to him. He tilted his head to steal a kiss that made her entire body feel hot and stared into her eyes through the darkness. "But we don't need to rush." He warned.

"It's almost been a year," Mal whispered, moving her mouth close to his ear, pulling the collar of his shirt down a bit further and exposing more skin. She could feel his breath, hot on her neck. She carefully bit at his ear lobe. Ben took a little fistful of the back of her shirt in response, then released her. "If anything, we've been putting this off."

"You're still-" Ben started, relaxing under her grip as she spoke.

"Young." Mal interrupted. "But I'm not a child. You're not going to break me. And there have been girls younger than me who were with their husbands. Snow White, Aurora, Ariel, Mulan, Jasmine, I could go on."

Ben's eyes sparkled. "No need." He assured her, leaning forward, and placing the softest of kisses on her nose. "You know that I want you - that I need you. It's all up to you."

Mal smiled and pulled herself on top of him. "That's all the permission I need." She laughed. She used the hem of her shirt to pull the fabric up and off her head as she pinned his legs down with hers and immediately started searching for the hem of his. Ben rolled his eyes as he sat up. He pulled her face forward to kiss her as the moon cast light down on them, and the night continued around them.

It was a different sort of responsibility, what followed. For Ben especially, he felt a heavy feeling of obligation fall onto his shoulders when he watched Mal move to his frame under the moonlight. When she was trying and failing to keep quiet. When the first tears came and dried and she was okay. When she was gasping and doing her best to not turn his back into a field of red, raised rows with her nails. He had her now, and she him. He had her hand first, and then her heart, and finally, she was trusting him with something she'd never trusted anyone with - herself.

Early the next morning, Mal was in her office, creating a new type of form that anyone left on the rotten part of the Isle would have to fill out and submit before they'd be allowed a trial to get into the city. As she spaced bars and lines on the page to her liking, she heard a knock at the door. She looked up and smiled when she saw Ben. "Hey, babe." She smiled as he set her forearms down on the desk to smile at him. Ben was wearing a brown, close-knit vest over a pale blue shirt, which Mal couldn't decide if it was a step-up from his sexy Isle attire or a step-down. He was holding a glass bowl of strawberries.

"Hey." Ben smiled and flushed a little at her pet name. "I brought you strawberries and wanted to make sure you were good." He presented the bowl in a half-toasting manner, and a half-sacrificing manner.

Mal rolled her eyes. "I'm fine, silly. I will say yes to strawberries though." She smiled as he brought the small bowl forward and snatched a red fruit off the top.

"I just want to make sure I didn't, like, break you or anything," Ben explained as he took a seat on the edge of the desk.
Mal rolled her eyes. "I think you give yourself entirely too much credit." She told him. She had come to the conclusion, however correct or incorrect, that the only way he'd ever break her was if he left her.

"Whatever." Ben chuckled, folding his hands in his lap and smiling.

"Want to see what I'm working on?" Mal asked. She turned the screen towards him as he leaned back to catch a glimpse of the on-screen contents. "I was thinking for, you know, other kids the villains end up having, people who decide to change their minds, that sort of thing." Mal shrugged. Ben's expression flatlined. "Oh, crap." He said. "I forgot that Doug needed me to fill out something in my office. Crap!"

Mal blinked. "Wasn't he here last night?" She asked.

"Yeah." Ben nodded. "He asked if I could get it to him by ten a.m, and that is in… thirty-four minutes." Ben jumped off the desk while looking frantically at his watch.

"Bye?" Mal asked with a sarcastic smile as he set one foot over the threshold.

"Oh!" Ben narrowly avoided skidding out into the hallway from his momentum, spun around, and hurried back to her. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and said: "Bye Mal." Then he hurried and sprinted down the hall. Mal chuckled to herself and continued work.

About a half-hour later, as she was finishing up, she heard heels clicking down the hallway outside her office. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of blue appear.

"M?" Evie called from the doorway.

"One moment, please, Evie," Mal begged as she saved her work and waited for the change to back up. There was a soft thud. Mal glanced up and saw a dark blue duffel bag – the same one Evie had come to Auradon with – at Evie's feet.

Evie shifted her weight from foot-to-foot as she began to tear up. "M…" Evie started. Her voice broke. Mal felt her chest go a little numb in shock. She stood up from her wheelie chair and offered the vacant seat to Evie. Evie sat down with a hiccup, and Mal gave her old friend a hug from behind.

"Auradon Accelerated?" Mal asked, feeling a lump enter her throat.

Evie nodded. "I'm sorry." Her voice shook as she began to wipe pearlescent tears from her eyes.

"Sorry for what?" Mal asked, though she, too, felt sorry. After all, it was her fault everything was so different. It was forever impossible to go back to the way things were.

"I'm leaving," Evie explained. "I don't feel like I belong here in the castle, especially with you and Ben. I thought I wanted something like this, but I hate the huge hallways and the empty rooms. I wanted to save you from Ben when I first came, and that idea has completely fizzled out. I don't know what to do with myself. I sit around all day and make clothes." Evie threw her hands into the air in exasperation. "I have no idea what I want!" She exclaimed. "I'm just… hoping I can find a purpose away from the past." She rolled her shoulders forward and slumped over in defeat.

Mal nodded. "I understand," She whispered. "You're one of my best friends and I want you to find out who you are. You don't have to worry about me." Mal squeezed Evie from behind. "We're a family. We may go different ways, but in the end, we always come back. We can do this. You can
do this."

Evie twiddled her thumbs. "Ben mentioned once that you wrote a letter to someone on the Isle which was never sent." She sniffled. "He thought it was for us."

Mal blinked. She was surprised Ben had remembered that letter. She'd honestly forgotten it.

"It was," She confirmed slowly, trying to retrace her steps to remember where she'd put it. "I taped it to the bottom of my desk in my old room. I don't think it was ever moved. Do you want to read it?" After several long seconds, Evie nodded. Mal drummed her fingers in thought and walked towards the door of the office. She picked up Evie's duffel bag and waited for her friend to compose herself enough to follow.

Down the silent hallways, they stalked without a word. They briefly passed Ben's office where he was scribbling away but did not stop to say hi. When they reached Mal's old room and opened the door, a waft of aerosol cleaner and comfort drifted out. Mal set the duffel bag on the bed as Evie took in the room. "It's so… empty," She sighed.

Mal shrugged as she trailed her fingers along the wall. "Well, all my things were moved out when I married Ben," She explained.

Mal walked over to the desk and laid on the carpet underneath the desk. Evie followed her example and, careful of her dress, laid down beside Mal. Underneath the desk, a simple piece of flimsy printer paper was folded in fifths and taped to the desk at two corners. Mal pried it off at the seams and handed it to Evie. Evie took it and stood up. She returned to sit on Mal's old bed and began to read aloud.

"Dear Carlos, Jay, and Evie." Evie started. "I know you've probably been worried about me, and I want you to know I am safe. They're going to make me a queen, but I won't have any ruling power over Auradon. Prince Benjamin, though we call him Ben here, is planning on splitting the Isle off of Auradon and making it its own country. It'll be different, but I feel like I could make something out of it. Maybe I'll be able to make to safer for when you guys have kids. Then they won't have to fight for their lives like we did. As of right now, they don't want me to bring anyone over, but I hope one day it's safe enough for me to see you guys. The royals are truly some of the kindest people around. King Adam doesn't seem to like me much, but I think he gets angry when he's nervous and this whole system is really out of his depth. Belle is soft-spoken and understanding, and Ben is funny, but I think he feels restricted by what his parents set up. He sees flaws, but he doesn't want to offend them by fixing them. Even so, he's extremely strong and is the type of person who you straighten up when he's around. He's kind and thoughtful as well.

"Right now, they're actually training me to be a queen. I got to look up all of you in the computer, and Auradon knows literally nothing. They have the bare minimum of records, there's not even anything on Jay! When I'm queen, I'm going to have to find a foolproof way to keep track of everyone. That way we'll know how to distribute food and you guys won't have to go hungry anymore.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be yet. Everyone here from Sophia, who is one of the palace servants, to the Fairy Godmother think I'm going to be a powerful Queen. I'm just not sure yet what I want to do. I've come to a conclusion though, that I'm happier being good than I was being evil. Sure, I'll never be the queen Auradon dreams of. I climb walls and hang out in the gardens with dirt on my face, but I think I can survive. The royals make it really easy to find a place with them. I feel like I didn't know I could belong here until I tried. In truth guys, I think I'm becoming part Isle and part Auradon. Maybe even something new and different entirely.
"I miss you guys a lot. You are always in my thoughts." Evie finished. More tears were in her eyes. She put the letter down and sniffled. Mal held her arms out for a hug, and the two embraced.

"It's going to be okay," Mal whispered in Evie's ear as she blinked back tears.

Evie took several shaky breaths as she leaned back and tried to steady herself. "I didn't know what you were going through." She whispered as Mal squeezed her hands. "Everything on the TV... I thought that you were dying and that world was lying..."

Mal put a hand on Evie's bicep. "The truth is out." She squeezed her friend's arm. "I don't want to let you down, E, but it'd... tear me apart to not listen to my heart."

Evie nodded and stretched her legs out and rubbed her sweaty palms on her knees. "I really have to go."

Mal rubbed her back lightly. "And I will never stop you." She promised.

"Even though we'll change?" Evie asked, shaking her head and scrubbing at her face. "Nothing can stay the same. If I go..."

"Nothing has to change," Mal promised. "And you know what? It's just growing pains. It'll end. Just... be proud of the scars because that's what makes us who we are." She squeezed Evie's hands. "You're a part of me. Just because I'm queen now, just because we're in Auradon doesn't mean I'll ever be out of reach. Between Auradon, the Isle, and the Moors... we can meet in between. And no matter how far you go, you're never going to be left alone."

"I don't want to leave you here," Evie admitted. Mal stiffened and opened her mouth to explain once again why she couldn't go, but Evie stopped her with a hand and a shake of her head. "I know you have to stay." She sighed. "Just... promise me you'll be safe?"

Mal smiled and blinked back tears. "Nothing has to change." She promised

Those words did Evie in all over again. She couldn't help but be afraid of what was coming. Evie wondered if Mal could have possibly felt anything like this while en route to her future a year ago.

Evie wrapped her oldest friend up in a hug and began to cry softly into her shoulder. Nothing was going to be the same for them ever again, and while a part of Mal was bitter and sad, she understood everything would work out. She wrapped her arms around Evie tightly, and they sat on Mal's old bed, relishing in the past until both found the strength to withdraw and let it go.

Down on the grounds an hour later, Mal, Ben, Belle, Adam, Sophia, Malice, and Lumiere gathered in front of the center circle to wish Jay, Evie, and Carlos goodbye. As Jay hefted their things into the back of a limousine, Carlos slowly twiddled his thumbs and Evie held her small backpack to her chest, shifting her weight in front of all the royals.

Mal sniffled. "You'll be okay?" She asked them all.

"Yeah." Carlos nodded. He looked downcast as he stared holes into the pavement. "We know how to turn in our papers, and Stewart will help us find our dormitories, and next week Jay and I will go get our driver's licenses so that we can drive while Evie learns, and we'll come up and see you guys every once in a while." He paused and was quiet for a few seconds. "We'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." Mal smiled. "We all will. And, you know what? I'll come to visit you guys too. Come see how you're doing in classes and everything."
"Classes don't start for a month." Carlos reminded her. "We're just... going." The words: "because we can't stay" hung in the air.

Everyone remained silent. Ben stepped forward and put a hand on the small of Mal's back. Her cheeks went a bit pink as fire erupted in her chest. She tilted her head to curl into his shoulder a little as he continued to talk. "You have your phones." He reminded them. "You'll never have to fall out of contact."

The Villain kids nodded. Jay closed the trunk with a snap and walked over to stand behind Evie. Mal focused on him. "You're going to take care of them, right?" She asked.

Jay blinked in surprise. Mal had been carefully holding him at a distance since he'd kissed her. He glanced down at her mouth for a second longer, then a smile spread across his face. "Yeah," He agreed. "I will."

Mal stepped forward, dodged Evie slightly, and gave Jay a hug. "You remember that mantra your dad used to make you recite?" She asked.

"There's no 'team' in 'I'." Jay snorted. He slipped a hand around her waist.

"Well, I personally always thought you worked well with a team." Mal punched his arm lightly and then lifted his hand off her waist. Jay's face fell slack. Mal smiled at him. "You work well with others. You like having people you can back up and who back you up. So, when you get to campus, just... find all the friends you can. Your teammates, classmates..." Mal trailed off with a smile.

Jay nodded. "Yeah. I will. Thank you," He paused, then smirked. "Queen Mal."

A look of horror fell onto her face. Mal hit his arm. "No," She said, trying to wiggle out from under his grasp. "Don't you call me that. You call me Mal. I'm Mal to you."

"The first," Jay continued with a growing smile, holding fast onto her hips as she tried to slip away.

"No!" Mal groaned, giving up and clapping her hands over her ears.

"Of the honorable moorland and the Isle of the Lost," Jay yelled playfully over her protests.

"Found," Evie corrected. Everyone turned to her. "It's more the Isle of the Found, now." She explained.

Mal tilted her head as she thought. "It is," She agreed. "Like, eighty to ninety percent of the Isle is in the city now." She shrugged. "I guess it's the Isle of the Found."

Everyone chuckled. Hugs were exchanged, and goodbyes were said. Ben was pleasantly surprised when the three villain kids came forward to say their own personal goodbyes to him. Evie even gave him a quick hug. "Thank you for bringing us over," She told him without her gaze leaving the ground.

"Of course," A warmth filled Ben's cheeks as he smiled. He'd done good, this was all going to work out.

Carlos shook his hand. "Take care of her, bro." He whispered.

"Always," Ben confirmed. He turned to Jay.
Jay held out a hand for Ben to shake, but as soon as Ben's hand was in his, pulled him into a manly hug, with two thumps on Ben's back to accentuate the action. When they broke apart, Jay twisted a leather cord around his wrist as he thought of what to say.

"Look, bro." He started with a heavy sigh. "I know I've got lots to thank you for, but I'm not used to this so bear with me." He exhaled. "Thanks for taking care of Mal." He started, gesturing to the purple-haired fairy queen as she stood up beside Belle. "She's one of the most important things to us all, and you really gave her a home she deserves. And… thanks for bringing us from the Isle, and always thinking about us. You never judged us when we judged you, you took us to Auradon Accelerated so we could figure out what we were good at, and now you're helping us attend… I don't know if I'll ever be able to repay you for all this, man."

Ben clapped Jay's shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it. It would be more than enough just for me to see you all happy."

Jay stared at Ben. He exhaled. "I can't deny that you are the best man I have ever had the pleasure of meeting in my life." He said honestly. "You're a brilliant king, a wonderful husband, and the best person in Auradon. If it had to be an Auradon man for Mal, I'm glad it was you. If I had a genie and only one wish, I would ask to be you." Jay shifted his weight. "And not just because you married the best girl on the Isle and my best friend." He added.


They shared another bro-hug and then Jay walked over to the car. Stewart was already in the front seat. He helped Evie inside first and watched as Carlos climbed in. Then he got in and shut the door. The window rolled down. Mal walked over and handed the letter she'd written months ago to Carlos through the window. "That's for you all." She explained. "Evie's already read it."

They took it. Everyone waved as the car started, and the villain kids left the palace, off to Auradon Accelerated.

Sophia and Lumiere headed inside, but everyone else walked to sit on the steps of the palace. Belle gave Malice to Mal, who smiled and cooed at the wide-awake baby. "I've been thinking." Belle started. "Do you like Michelle or Madison at all?"

"Madison is cute." Mal nodded. "Let's not give her a bad middle name, though. I get that it worked with Ben, but I feel like being the daughter of the evilest Faerie alive is humbling enough."

"We should do something with rebirth and starting anew," Adam suggested.

"Hope?" Ben asked.

"Can we find an adjective that starts with B or A?" Mal asked. "You know, for Belle and Adam?"

Belle teared up. "You sure?" She asked.

Mal nodded.

Ben put his arm around Mal. "There's Blithe." He suggested. "It's like fly, almost. Blie-th. It means happy or joyous."

"Madison Blithe?" Mal asked.

"Benson," Belle added. "All of our last names are Benson unless you want her last name to be Fae for your mom."
"I like Benson." Mal shook her head. "Madison Blithe Benson?" She looked around. No one rejected.

Newly-christened Madison blinked up at Mal with big, round, green eyes. Mal chuckled and held her fingers in front of the tiny girl's face. Madison looked amazed as she tried to grab for the pretty polish on Mal's nails.

"Madison. That's you." Mal told her.

Ben leaned over her shoulder. "Hi, Madison." He called softly. Mal handed the small girl to him and smiled as he carefully held her in front of him. "I'm Ben, and I'm your new brother. You're going to grow up with us, and you're always going to be able to express yourself. You'll never have to worry about not fitting in because we'll always love you, and one day you and your sister will run around and prank us all with magic."

Mal snorted and laid her head against Ben's shoulder. He glanced up at her with a tiny smirk and held her gaze for a few seconds. She put her fingers back in front of Madison's face, where the small girl worked on slowly moving her tiny fingers to try and grab onto her older sister. Sunlight slanted past the palace roof, like the building was trying to cast as much light as possible. For many long minutes, everything was peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Mal and Malice journey to the Isle to find that everything is being worked out. They bring Audrey back in time for Mal to meet Jack Frost. It is decided that Auradon will join the war. Ben and Mal discuss what will happen if Ben is called north to lead the army and discuss Maleficent. Maleficent is diagnosed with magical poisoning.

So Many Spoilers in this chapter. I read it and was like: "I can't believe I put this ALL in here."

Chapter Notes

I do not own Disney's Descendants, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Incredibles 2, The Little Mermaid, Cinderella, Aladdin, 101 Dalmatians, Frozen, Mulan, and The Princess and the Frog or Dreamwork's Rise of the Guardians, Sinbad; Legend of the Seven Seas, and How to Train your Dragon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The baby was curled into Mal's collar as she stepped off the ship and onto the Isle. It was the day after the Isle Rush had ended. Everyone had made it inside quickly. There had been some mistakes of people who shouldn't have been brought in and who were ejected from the barrier, but, overall, everything was flowing smoothly. Mal kept her hands wrapped around the small child, who was awake and peering around curiously, as she wove around people who were coming up to meet the ship. Coming off after her was an emergency arsenal of doctors and nurses to help the Isle Folk.

"They've been trying to assign rooms to everyone," Mal explained. "I assume they've been putting the seriously wounded on the first floors or in one of the larger homes together." She led the trek up to the city and stopped a young man as he walked past their group. "Excuse me, where can I find Eliza or Evelyn?" She asked. The young man turned and pointed towards the city entrance before continuing on to the beach. Mal nodded and turned to her crew of health care officials. "Wait here, I'll go and figure out where you'll be most needed."

Evelyn, May, Mercy, and Myth were all passed out alongside the gates and the inner walls of the city. Evelyn's head was slumped back and she was snoring in the sunlight with Mercy collapsed across her lap and May dropping her head on Myth's arm. A little meadow of grass had slowly started growing outwards. Mal knelt down and shook Evelyn's shoulder a little.

"Oh, let mom sleep," A voice came from behind her. Mal turned to see Eliza approaching with two large umbrellas. She propped them up at angles to shield them from the sunlight. "They were up until two or three trying to get everyone inside. Managed it, but they're exhausted."

"Oh dear," Mal frowned. "I wish I had been here. I'm sorry."

"Oh dear," Mal frowned. "I wish I had been here. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. Besides, you wouldn't have been able to do much. You have to let your magic have rests,
and breaking a barrier before putting it back up is probably more than enough exercise for you." Eliza stretched her arms and nodded before leaning forward and ruffling Madison's hair. "Not to mention the, uh, battle and your healing and mind-wiping."

"Yeah, is Uma doing okay?" She asked, furrowing her brow.

"Dizzy and Anastasia have kind of taken her under their wings," Eliza informed Mal. "Uma has an apartment right by theirs, so they've been hanging out together. It's a good match. She's very curious about the Isle, but isn't too concerned about everything she forgot yet."

"That's good," Mal exhaled. She turned and gestured to the doctors standing beside the doors. "I brought you guys doctors. Where should I have them start?"

"Oh, I have records!" Eliza exclaimed with a bright smile. "I finished them fifteen minutes before your boat docked! I have them over in that building over there - that's where Mom and I have decided to set up your government headquarters, by the way. All your coins and your apartment records and everything is over there. Come on, I'll show you!" She began to walk away, and Mal followed her. They walked into a building where a painted wooden sign indicated 'Utopia Headquarters' and Eliza left Mal to look around as she hurried into her office and pulled down a large book. There was a carpet laid down, though it wasn't the cleanest and obviously needed some patching. Eliza's office was the larger of the two that Mal could see, and with a large bookcase wherein all the records appeared to be being stored. Eliza set down a large, edge-shredded binder and took a moment to point down the hall before she flipped it open. "Your office is down there. We know you have one at the palace, but we figured you would want something on the Isle for in the future when you want to meet with people. And we also have a committee room set up because I know you said you wanted one, but to be honest, this place was designed for a small business and not for a government building. I've already started passing ideas back and forth with mom, and she's going to design something more functional to be built beside the park the fae women put in."

"Wow, you guys went right to work," Mal hummed. She noticed that, at the back of the room, what she had intended to be a check-out desk for a store or something had been converted into a receptionists area, though there wasn't much Islanders would need to come in for yet. Eliza certainly had foresight, as she'd already allocated sitting areas and a little booklet with a sign reading: Appointments in Advance.

"Yeah, we did," Eliza agreed, flipping through her booklet to a little section marked with a tab as 'medical'. Other tabs read 'Businesses', 'Orphans', and 'Future Plans'. "Audrey has actually been super insightful. We've been going around to find people who can take care of kids since there's so many under twelve who were just living in packs on the streets, found a couple people who can teach trade skills, and with Evie's brother at work, we're starting a tree collage so people can know where they come from and who their parents are."

"So, like, when did you sleep?" Mal asked, raising an eyebrow.

Eliza shook her head. "I have weird insomnia. I can stay awake for ages, especially when I get going on a kick. I'll probably crash at the end of tomorrow or something. Here!" She slammed her finger down on a slot. "I know exactly where I need to start. Here, how about I go out and direct them and you can take a look at your office real quick. I think mom might have put a few things in there that we need and such."

She started to book it to the door, but Mal spun on her heel with a gasp. "Woah!" She exclaimed. "Are you... are you sure you don't need me or anything?"

Eliza chuckled. "Nope, I got this. By the way, I started a little list of positions we need to create
and fill to help us run the Isle a little better. I have it divided by block right now, but you should probably take a look at it and make sure it's something you like. I'll show you later!” And with that parting statement, she dashed away. The door swung shut behind her. Mal ran her fingertips up and down Madison's back in shock as she took a few steps towards the door and watched Eliza dash towards the group of doctors, open her binder to a place she'd marked with her finger, and immediately begin handing out room numbers of people who needed help. Like clockwork.

She had expected that the Isle would, at some point, stop needing her help as much and eventually she'd have a day job somewhat similar to Ben's, but she hadn't expected people like Eliza to have this whole thing figured out so soon after arriving. Incredible.

Mal turned and followed Eliza's directions down the hall, swaying a little as Madison fussed and curled her little nails into Mal's shirt. At the end of the hall, in Evelyn's pretty designer scrawl, was the label 'Queen Mal's office'. She opened it. It was, really, four walls, a door, and a window. A desk and a bookcase and a sturdy wooden chair were the only furnishings. Mal frowned. Eliza and Evelyn were right. They needed a proper government building, not a repurposed store.

On her desk were several packets and papers. Mal gave a cursory look at them and discovered one was a rough draft of a building. Two floors with a meeting room centered on the second and a community room on the first. In the back, located in a circular alcove on the second floor, was a tiny label 'Mal's office'. Ah, so these were the plans for the future building that Evelyn had thrown out onto paper. Mal carefully pried Madison's fingernails off of her shirt and switched her sister to her arms before sitting on the desk and spreading the papers in her hands as if to show her. Eliza's designs weren't perfect, and there were obviously many corrections that would need to be made before her plans came to fruition, but already Mal could see the new place in her mind. The first floor would be very open, community-based, where people could have a safe place to meet and they could host events in the center room and people could come to get problems fixed and questions answered. And on the second floor, everyone's offices in one centralized location. Her own office could have spray paint on the walls and graffiti on the door. They could get portraits or paintings of the villains of the land to honor their roots and put them in the hallways. And the outside... would be nothing like Auradon's buildings. Auradon, with their stretching spires and sparkling palaces. Mal's building would be Isle, with stone detailing up the sides and glass set to let in as much light and goodness as possible. She could already picture the opaque rock decorations they could use to accent the structure along with the crests and symbols she'd long since been drafting for the Isle's use.

Madison reached forward and tried to grab onto the paper. She couldn't quite figure out how to unwrap her fingers though, so it just looked like she was punching the paper as she let out a couple of excited coos. Mal giggled, and the sound felt weird inside her throat. "It's pretty cool, huh?" She asked with a chuckle. "Us Isle folk, we know how to get things done." She hoped the Isle was never as obsessed with their government as Auradon was, watching their every move and creating massive divides between magical and non-magical, royal and citizen.

The door burst open and someone wearing a pink t-shirt whose sides had been cut and tied into fringe and some grey shorts and leather boots burst into the room. "Sorry!" Audrey gasped, running her hands through her hair and under her eyes hastily. The entire left side of her face had red marks and sand was coating her hair, so Mal assumed she must have fallen asleep on the beach last night instead of in her room. Her makeup hadn't been done for two days now, and Mal had never seen Audrey looking so natural looking. Red voodoo paint marks were on her right bicep, probably done by either Freddy or Celia Facilier, depending on who had been allowed inside. Celia, as she recalled, was rather close to her father, so she might have stayed.

Mal blinked at the daughter of Aurora several times as Audrey straightened up and her breathing

slowed. "How was the party?" She asked.

"Oh, it was great," Audrey gasped, stifling a little smile as she continued trying to attack the snarls in her hair. "They made lights out of bottles and strung them up... it was way cool. I hung out with Uma and Dizzy and a couple of new girls from the Isle. I fell asleep as the sun was coming up and then someone shook me awake and told me you were here, so-" Audrey paused to take a large gulp of air. "I was wondering if I could stay another day? Not just to party, like I want to help too, but would that be okay?"

If Mal were to say that she'd been expecting this reaction and this situation and the daughter of Aurora asking her to stay behind on the Isle of the Lost, she'd be lying. She was completely dumbfounded as she searched for an answer. "Um, actually, Audrey, your mom is worried sick about you." She explained. "She wants you home... relatively soon. Last I'd heard, she'd called Belle twenty-three times to see if you were home yet. Belle asked me to either send you home or, um, drag you home?" Not Belle's exact words, but Mal figured that the meaning would be preserved if she toned down her mother-in-law's exasperation.

Audrey's expression dropped into one of heartbreak. "Oh," She sighed, hands falling to her sides as she let out a disappointed sigh.

Mal cleared her throat. "Well, um, you could always come back later. It's just... I don't want your mom to freak out if I have you stay longer. I could just let you know whenever I'm coming down and-"

"That'd be great!" Audrey exclaimed, brightening up immediately.

They stayed until about five, at which time Mal had gathered a list of things that would need to be completed from her real office in Auradon. With great sorrow, Audrey boarded the ship to return to Auradon with her. Mal knew very well that it would not be the last time Audrey went to the Isle.

The sun was beginning to set as Mal returned to the palace. Since Stewart had driven Evie, Jay, and Carlos in, Mal had taken the opportunity to test out her wings full-fold and found it was much, much faster than driving to and from the pier. She could land on the balcony to her old room and be in her office before forty-five minutes had passed. She still wasn't brave enough to try and fly over the water to the Isle, but maybe soon?

As Mal walked into her office and began to turn on her computer, Sophia walked past. "I'm leaving for the night a little early today." Sophia let her know. Her black hair was braided back and she was wearing a pretty skirt and blouse. "But you should know that... something is off with your mother. She's losing scales and changing color from black to grey."

"Uh-oh." Mal frowned. "Maybe I should take her to a vet or something?"

Sophia shrugged. "Whatever you think is best. You might also want Fairy Godmother to look at her."

"That's a good idea." Mal nodded. "I'll call her and get her opinion before I decide what to do." The computer made a whirring sound, and Mal began typing in her password.

"Do you have her number?" Sophia asked.

"No." Mal shook her head. "But Ben should. I'll ask him for it."

"Alright." Sophia nodded. "Have a good night."
"Goodnight, Sophia." Mal smiled and waved. She looked down at her calendar and skimmed her upcoming events for the next few weeks. It felt like it was already almost time for her to return to the moors, even though it was only the fourth. Doug had scheduled a maintenance check of her system for the day after she was gone. He seemed to like taking advantage of her absences.

Mal pulled out her phone. She uploaded a text post to the castle page. "Don't know if any of you noticed the giant dragon flying over the Isle yesterday, but that was my mom. I broke the barrier over the Isle and she transformed before I put it back up. Pro: no more acid rain and polluted water on the Isle. Con: Fairy Godmother's wand won't work there anymore. My mom has been shrunk down to a lizard and is here with me in Auradon, but she's kinda just… sitting under a heat lamp and shedding a lot. Not very interesting."

She hesitated, then made a smaller comment: Forgot to mention my husband got himself kidnapped and Miss Princess Audrey took on pirates with a sword. It was wicked cool."

Finally, she uploaded a picture of Madison and captioned it: "new baby sister. Madison Blithe Benson. Belle and Adam are adopting her since (believe it or not) being queen takes up a lot of time."

She texted Belle, Adam, and Ben and said: "I just uploaded a ton of stuff. Be prepared for the news app to blow up."

Belle sent back: "Twelve minutes, tops."

As Mal texted Ben to ask for the Fairy Godmother's number, Evie sent a picture. It was of a frilly pink girl's room with beautiful white and gold sculpting on the walls. Two bunk-beds with beautiful, colorful patterned bedspreads were set on either side of a large window looking out over Auradon Accelerated's campus and the sunset. "Night one," Evie said. "Wish me luck."

"You can do this," Mal reassured her.

As she began to type a paragraph in response to Evie, a strange sound filled the room. Mal looked up. The window to the outside was starting to freeze over. The rays of the sunset began to scatter across the room as frosty patterns spread over the pane.

Mal stood up. The frost now covered the window completely. She walked to the window and peered through the window as best she could through the heavy layers of frost. As she did, a strong line appeared in the icy mosaic. It was as if someone had begun drawing letters backward onto the glass. Mal's shock faded as she skimmed the message. It read: "Can I come in?"

An ice magical was outside her window. She peered through the foggy lines as the frost began to fade and spotted a light blue hoodie outside. Frost powers and flight powers. Okay.

Mal held her hand to the lock in the center of the pane and pushed it open. She opened the window out as far as it could go and stepped back. A face appeared, and then a teenage boy slipped in through the window. Mal sat back on her desk as he landed. It was the same icy boy Ben had met a little less than a month ago.

"Um…” He exhaled. "Hi?” He asked. He seemed to be a little intimidated by her. Mal guessed he hadn't been expecting someone with purple hair by the way he was staring at it in awe.

Mal sized him up. He had a definite sense of magic about him, but his was unlike almost any she'd known before. Almost. Mal smirked. "You're Ericka and Jessie's dad, huh?" She asked, immediately drawing the parallels between his and Elsa's magic. It pleased her that she could know
that off the top of her head.

The boy jumped and rose off the ground in sudden alarm. "Uh… what?" He stuttered.

"Aren't you?" Mal asked, tilting her head.

He fumbled for a response, possibly an excuse, and then settled back down. "How'd you know?"
He asked, rotating his staff in his palms.

"Magic." Mal shrugged. She squinted at him. Ericka was past twenty, but this man…. "How old are you?" She asked, frowning a little in concentration.

"Seventeen?" He trailed off.

"No." Mal shook her head. "I mean how long have you existed?"

He was silent for a second, then leaped off the ground to perch on the top of his curved stick. It remained upright, balancing him as if he weighed nothing. "Almost four hundred years." He admitted.

Mal stared at him. Her hands froze with an iron grip on the edge of her desk. She examined her unlikely guest from head to toe, taking in his bare feet, white hair, and the way the room had grown colder since he'd arrived. A winter spirit?

"You're about to make my life a whole lot harder, aren't you?" She asked, frowning a bit. And just after she'd finally patched up her life with Ben and on the Isle, too.

He winced. "Sorry." He admitted. "My name is Jack Frost, and I've been waiting to talk to you and the king for about a month now, but no one can see me, so I can't exactly make an appointment."

"Ugh." Mal groaned, sitting down with her head spinning. "Okay. Just… just stay here – stay." She pointed sternly at him as if she knew he would flee. "I'll text Ben and he'll be along shortly."

Jack Frost floated down from his staff and took a seat in a chair against the wall. Mal returned to her seat and began to text her husband. The frost melted completely off the window as frost began to creep through the carpet and covered the chair Jack was sitting on.

The message went through and was read immediately. Mal tapped her fingers on her desk as she watched her guest fidget. "You know," She started, "Jessie looks a lot like you. Same nose and everything." Ever since Ben had asked her what Madison might have looked like if she and he were her parents, she'd been examining everyone's features. Ben, she'd noticed, had the same physic as his dad, though his emotions definitely ran in the same court as his mom.

Jack looked startled. "Yeah." He agreed. "She does."

"Ericka looks more like Elsa, though." Mal hummed.

Jack shrugged. "She looks more like her now that she's older. When she was younger, she was very mixed between the two of us." Talking about his daughter was helping him relax a little bit.

"How long have you known Elsa?" Mal asked as she began to shuffle through papers.

"I don't know." Jack shrugged. "Time doesn't mean too much to me. She was twelve."

"A while, then." Mal decided.
There came huffing and puffing from down the hall. Mal looked over as Ben rushed in, red-faced.

Mal raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for hurrying?" She remarked.

Ben rolled his eyes and waved half-heartedly at Jack as he took a seat beside the door. "Hey, Jack." He gasped. "I was beginning to wonder if I'd see you again."

Mal glanced from Ben to Jack. "I see you've met." She remarked.

"Sorry." Ben pounded on his chest momentarily as he caught his breath. "Mal, this is Jack. He appeared in our bedroom while you were gone and asked to see us but left when he heard you weren't there."

Jack coughed. "I'm sorry." He said. "It's nothing personal… I wanted to speak to you both at once."

Mal frowned and clasped her hands together. "But… are you here to talk about the Isle? Or Auradon?" She asked.


"Oh." Mal scrunched her eyebrows together. "But… I'm not in charge of Auradon. I don't have very much power here at all."

"Really?" Jack asked. "Oh. I'd still like to have you here, please?"

Mal examined Jack's nervous posture. "It's because I'm magical." She guessed. She glanced sideways at her husband, whose color was beginning to return. He nodded, breathless. "You don't think Ben will understand?" She asked Jack. "He still married me, even knowing I was magical."

"With all due respect," Jack muttered angrily. "Auradon wasn't exactly partial to magic under his parent's rule."

Silence reigned. Mal glanced at Ben, who wouldn't meet her gaze. He slumped in his chair and stared at the carpet.

"Well," Mal said tactfully. "Proceed then."

Jack straightened up a little and curled his bare feet around the base of his staff. "I've come to you with a request for help." He said. "I come from a land far, far north. There's a whole different world up there – a continent aside from Auradon. It's full of creatures far different from Auradon's. We're… built differently, as I'm sure Mal noticed. We have trolls, ogres, thousands of creatures. Before we discovered each other, we were all isolated. But after we discovered each other, all of our villains banded together against all of us. It's basically the opposite of Auradon over there. The villains have pillaged the land as they spread across the continent, and two villains in particular – Pitch Black and Eris, have been wreaking havoc on the inhabitants of the land. We're… loosing."

Mal exchanged a look with Ben. Ben straightened up with a rigid spine and frowned. At that moment, he seemed more like his father than his mother. Mal was reminded distinctly of Adam when she'd first arrived in Auradon when he'd stood with a fixed scowl and guarded himself behind an arsenal of thick vocabulary. Or when the spell had been broken, and he had snapped and sneered while Belle shook and sobbed.

"Who sent you?" Ben demanded.

Jack tousled his blonde locks carefully. "I'm… kind of one of the leaders of the resistance force?"
There's Nicholas St. North, E. Aster Bunnymund, Sanderson Mansnoozie, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, Proteus Fiennes, basically the Belle-Cinderella-Ariel-Mulan-Aurora-Elsa mix of our continent."

"In your non-biased opinion." Mal snorted. Jack chuckled and shrugged.

Ben raised an eyebrow at them. It was clear he didn't get the jibe. Mal rolled her eyes. "Mr. Frost and Elsa have a fling going." She explained. "It's probably why Ericka should try focusing her magic through a wand or staff rather than with her hands like Elsa." Ben raised his eyebrows and nodded as he decided to roll with the punches.

Jack wrung his hands. "My family issues aside, I was sent to request help from Auradon. I happen to be one of the fastest in our group. The heroes of our realm have known about you for some time, however, you're kind of our best-kept secret. The villains have no clue about you, but if they destroy the rest of us, they'll have no qualms taking Auradon. As I've heard, you have an Island full of nasties who the villains would probably love to have some back-up from."

"Probably." Mal agreed. She and Jack met eyes and then swung their gazes over to Ben. Ben bit his cheek, clasped his hands together, and thought on what to do. After several long minutes, he turned towards Mal, as if he had decided to ignore the fact Jack was in the room.

"Can I share my thoughts with you?" He asked with a knife's edge to his voice.

Mal made a motion with her hand like she was offering the floor to him.

"If I sit this out and then the villains enter our land, we'll have to do an emergency arousal of the populace, and they may be angry we didn't take initiative. If you join, I'll probably end up joining after you even though I really don't want a war. But we'll be contributing Auradon supplies to an effort on a continent we've never known about before, and people may be angry about that as well. The Isle still isn't functioning 100%, and you'll be busy there. On top of that – I've never led a war effort, nor seen my dad do it. You understand strategy and you're good at fighting, but you don't have that full-scale experience either. I'd have to call in other rulers, which I can do, of course, but most of us coexist by never seeing each other except at social groups. Especially among the princes, there's some bad blood. I might be inviting controversy into the kingdom."

Mal scooted her chair away from her desk and pulled her leg onto her knee. "If you don't join and you decide to sit it out, and later a fight comes to Auradon, you won't have the same allies you do now. They'll have been destroyed. Knowing you, you'll take that on your conscience. Can you live knowing people will die if you don't step in?" The answer, as she already knew, was no. She and Ben were somewhat similar in that regard. It was what made them both leaders.

Ben bit his lip. "Li Shang and Mulan would know how to lead a war effort." He remarked. "I'd end up having to hand reins over to people like them."

"Good to have multiple voices," Mal remarked. "Who else?"

"Stefan died years ago, thank goodness." Ben sighed. "But he's the only person I can think of off the top of my head with any real warfare experience." Ben rolled his eyes. "You'd think we were a peaceful nation or something."

Mal snorted. "Does Elsa's trade war with Weasleton count?" She asked.

"No." Ben and Jack retorted at the same time.

Mal rolled her eyes. "In theory, if we do join forces and conquer your villains, what next?" She
asked Jack. Ben spun back around to face Jack as he shriveled a little under their gazes.

"I wasn't exactly given a ton of bargaining chips when they sent me." He admitted. "I'll be honest, we don't have a ton. We're mostly fueling our resources into our own losing battle. But… I'm going to go out on a limb here, when we win, we'll accept whatever barrier claims you want to impose between the two nations, we'll grant war spoils within reason, and… you can decide the fate of the remaining villains."

Mal scrunched up her nose. "Sounds like you're pawning most of the law stuff on us. Why should we deal with your villains?"

Jack sighed. "I don't know… I mean, your methods worked out pretty well." He rubbed the bridge of his nose in exhaustion. "I'd have to converse it with the other leaders. The only thing I can promise you is peace once we bring the villains down. Otherwise, they'll just cross over into your territory. Already we have several escaped sea monsters, and-"

"Sorry." Ben choked. "Sea monsters?" Mal stared at Jack with wide eyes as she gripped the side of the desk. Ben, meanwhile, was digging his palms into his kneecaps. Every muscle in his body was tense.

"Uh, yeah?" Jack trailed off. "The missing ones are from a goddess named Eris. She lives in the realm of Tartarus. No one can get out though since she locked the gates, so we've stopped sending people in. You have to have the same kind of dark magic as her."

"Perchance…" Ben swallowed. "Is said sea monster large, with tentacles, tannish-green and slimy?"

Jack looked horrified. "Oh no." He muttered.

"Oh no?" Mal asked with increasingly narrowed eyes.

"You've seen our monsters in Auradon?" Jack began to float in his anxiety. Snowflakes fell from underneath his feet.

"It pulled an entire island off the coast of the great forest into the sea." Ben supplied. "And we tried to open fire on it about a month ago. Our navy has been patrolling the perimeter up there for a couple of months now."

Jack shook his head. "It's probably too late." He sighed. "One of Eris's pets. Name of Cetus. He probably returned to tell her what he found."

Mal glanced at Ben. Ben stared at Jack in shock, and then glanced at her. She held his gaze. For several seconds, there was no sound in the room. Then Mal gave Ben an unfortunate look and opened her mouth. "Like it or not," She told him. "I believe we're at war."

"Another monster was sighted off the coast," Ben grumbled when Mal stepped out of the shower that night. "Further west, almost to the Moorlands. Auradon Navy shot it and collected the remains." He was sitting in a chair against the wall, typing furiously on his phone.

Mal hummed as she pulled her pajama shirt straight. "Good thing I told you to send the navy up, right?" She asked.

"Right," Ben agreed, rubbing one of his eyelids. "You have incredible foresight."
Mal returned to the bathroom briefly to brush her teeth and find a comb in one of the drawers. She began to comb through her damp locks as Ben gnawed on his cheek and mashed out several e-mails on his phone. "Jack says he thinks the border will just get messier as they continue to lose forces up there." She reminded him. "What did Adam say about a war?"

"That he doesn't know how to lead one." Ben sighed. He put his phone away and gestured to a chair beside him. Mal sat down and Ben threaded his fingers together. "I think we're almost certainly going to join, though." Ben murmured. "I already released a short decree about how it's important to protect those who cannot protect themselves, and how we need to step up when we are called. People are talking about how something is going on. I'm hoping the talk will make the revelation a bit less shocking."

Mal scoffed. "Less shocking? That there's a continent that Auradon never even knew about?" She laughed. "People are going to think you guys at the palace have been hiding this for years."

"I know." Ben sighed. "There's not much we can do, though." He looked up and watched Mal comb the last of her tangles out. "Which means you and I have a problem." He whispered.

Mal frowned. "About what?" She asked.

"This is an Auradon fight." Ben murmured. "I'm not a general and I have no war experience, but that doesn't mean I might not be called north to lead everyone."

Mal shrugged. "Well, duh. You're the king. People like to see rulers who are out there fighting with them. It's a union thing. And it'll be good for the people who are here to know that you're up there and-" Her face fell. "Oh." She gasped. "But... you're Auradon's core ruler." She turned to stare at Ben, who was nodding and looking a little grave. Then, suddenly, the reality came crashing down on her. He might leave. Her heart twisted.

"I can't rule Auradon from up there," Ben whispered. "For one, cell coverage doesn't cover. I'd have to decree everything by mail or using that basin of yours, and that simply takes too long. People are not going to be happy about the war after so many years of peace, and there may be a lot of unrest. If there are any revolts or public statements, I won't be able to react quickly enough to help here at home. I would need you to step up and cover the third throne."

Mal wilted a little in her chair. "So I would have to cover Auradon, the Isle, and the Moorlands?" She sighed.

Ben held his hands up with a sigh. "I don't know if you would be able to go to the Moorlands as much as you need to be there." He explained. "Auradon doesn't realize it, but they would literally lose their minds if the palace disappeared for a month."

"What about your parents?" Mal asked. "Even if I had to shorten time to two weeks, I have to be at the moors to make sure their magic isn't becoming stifled."

"Two weeks is still too much." Ben shook his head. "You know me. I take off maybe a day every two months. I have to be in the palace on a day to day basis to be balancing resources and addressing complaints and having video meetings with people all over the country. People are constantly coming to me to get approvals on public efforts and I get complaints twenty-four-seven about pollution, people wanting different types of schooling, people complaining that we have a standing army and no enemies in sight, people complaining that we don't have enough of a standing army and no enemies in sight. All of this is just daily occurrences that I have to balance. You or I can't just... vanish for two weeks."
"I have to be at the moors, Ben." Mal sighed. "And I have to get to the Isle. I have to be there to lead people too."

"I know, but if I get called northward, there has to be someone to cover Auradon for me, and you're next in line." Ben leaned forward and took her hands. "I need to start making arrangements. You're next in line for my throne and you have the most responsibility of Auradon after me. Can you or can you not take care of my country if I have to leave?"

"I don't know how to take care of Auradon." Mal sighed, closing her eyes and squeezing his hands. "I know you and Doug spent all those hours but I'm going to be honest, I let most of that go because the Isle is just so different from Auradon. We'll have to carve out some time so you reteach me a few things."

"Mal." Ben drew her attention back to him. "Can you take care of my country?"

Mal sighed. "I don't know, Ben. How would I take care of the moors?"

Ben bit his lip. "I don't know." He sighed.

"Did Adam say anything about-" Mal began, but Ben cut her off.

"I have all those things I've been working on that I haven't talked with Dad about," Ben admitted heavily, taking a hand and pressing two fingers to the bridge of his nose. "I'm taking out a few laws that give kingdoms the right to send people to the Isle of the Lost for certain crimes after three trials, one that allows companies to destroy land if there isn't anyone occupying it, and, um-" Ben swallowed. "I really am working to remove the laws on magic." He coughed. "Among others that I probably shouldn't be telling you about yet." He looked a bit flustered.

Mal let out a laugh. "So, you'd prefer me in your office over your father because you're concerned about how he'll react to you undoing several of his life's works?"

Ben shook his head as he let out a little laugh. "Yeah, something like that." He told her.

"But if some of that is confidential, would you want me there at all?" Mal asked.

"I'd rather have someone disconnected from the issue, for the most part, than my dad, who worked very hard on all these things I'm ripping apart." Ben sighed, running a hand through his hair. "But you can't go anywhere with any of the information in my office." He warned.

"Where would I go?" Mal scoffed. "None of my friends really enjoy hearing about you, aside from Sophia, and we only talk about our love lives together." Ben let out a laugh at her statement. She rolled her eyes and bit her lip as she continued thinking. "I would probably have to put a lot of things aside for when you come back." She sighed. "Oh god, let's see here." She took her other hand out of his and folded them together as she thought. "The moors are peaceful and will remain that way unless they feel threatened by Auradon. You already know that story, though. And it's a community-based nation. The different species work things out among them and my main job is to protect their borders and secure the magic inside. That's not a big job but it's definitely something I'm required to be present for. And the Isle as well - there's almost no way for me to get a hold of Evelyn from Auradon. They do things by themselves and everyone is really proactive but I'm still expected to be over there so I can organize systems and start directing trade and I have to be actively finding ways to boost our economy because we started completely from scratch. Those are both things I cannot be in the palace for, Ben. I have to be out."

"I'm sure you could definitely set aside a lot of things for when I get back," Ben replied, though he
was looking a bit stressed. "And not all of it has to be done in-office. I'd prefer you didn't work on those classified things outside of my office or really, on some things, at all, but the video calls from the lesser royals that happen can be taken from any secure location."

"What about all the people who come to you and want you to pass new laws or give them money to start new things?" Mal asked.

"You'd want to be in-office with the books and everything." Ben sighed. He ran a hand over his face. "Okay, this just won't work." He stood up and began to pace. "Is... there any chance I can take all the important stuff out of my office and leave it in yours? And is there also any chance you can handle all the important business stuff, since you're second in line, and I can have my parents split video conferences and the easy stuff?"

"Is it for sure that you're leaving then?" Mal sighed.

"I'm going to try and stay." Ben sighed. "But, just in case." He sat back down. "Do you have any concerns?"

"Yeah." Mal sighed. "I don't want to be responsible for Auradon. Maybe that's selfish of me, but I just don't know the country that well and the citizens and the government are so different from what I'm used to governing..." She shook her head. "I don't know if I can do it. And I don't want you to leave either."

Ben let out a laugh and got back to his feet. He held a hand for her, helped her up, and pulled her into his embrace. Mal went into his grasp and leaned her head onto his chest as she thought. Ruling Auradon... she almost couldn't comprehend it. How would she rule the moorlands, and Auradon, and the Isle? She wished she could go up north instead of him, but the same problems existed. Ben couldn't travel to the Moors to make sure they hadn't started to denature again, which sometimes they had when she arrived. And the Isle was different from what he was used to; he couldn't rule it as she could.

"I'll try and stay," Ben promised. "That way you won't have to worry for Auradon." Mal hummed and wrapped her arms around his back. Ben let one of his arms drop but kept the other around her shoulder. He looked over at Maleficent, who was sitting under her lamp, shivering. "Your mom doesn't look too good." He whispered.

Mal looked over to the terrarium. Maleficent was shedding scales and turning a light grey color. She frowned. "No, she doesn't." She agreed. "I think I need to call the Fairy Godmother." She walked out of Ben's grasp and over to her mother with a deep frown. Ben stood behind the couch and watched as Mal fiddled with the heat lamp, bringing it a little closer to Maleficent.

"Do you think she's aware of us?" Ben asked. "Like, can she hear you and I talking?"

"I don't know." Mal shrugged, examining the lizard. She sat down on the couch and Ben took hold of her shoulders and began to massage them. Mal gave him an odd look over her shoulder, and then examined her mom. "I wonder what she thinks of us." She said aloud.

"Chances are she doesn't think too highly." Ben reasoned, leaning down to kiss Mal's hair. "You kind of failed to overthrow the monarchy, remember?"

"And fell in love, how dare I." Mal laughed. "Not to mention everything we got up to last night." She put a hand on top of Ben's as they worked into her shoulders. A warm feeling erupted in her stomach at the memories. "She's probably pretty disgusted with me." Mal laughed.
"We were quiet." Ben protested with a frown. "And the door was shut."

"Still." Mal murmured. "Neither of us tried to keep it from being obvious when we got up this morning." On the contrary, they'd sat in bed for an extra thirty minutes before getting up, exploring each other in the daylight, and then both had made grabs at each other as they brushed their teeth and headed out the door. Mal reached forward and ran a hand along the top of the glass container. "I swore revenge against her when I first came here. I was so mad..." She laughed. It had been so long ago.

"Hmm." Ben let go of Mal's shoulders and leaned over the couch beside her. Mal fell deeper into thought as she considered the shivering state of Maleficent. She moved her head a little and took a small breath. "Do you think she loves me?" She asked aloud.

Ben blinked. "I don't know." He said honestly. "I would think so. She's your mom, and you're her daughter. She raised you. How could she not love you?"

"But she sold me." Mal looked over her shoulder. "Maybe I never meant anything to her. Maybe I was just her chance off of the Isle."

Ben put his arms around her. "I don't know." He whispered. "Maybe we'll never know. She must have cared about you in some degree, though, otherwise, you wouldn't be here." Mal cocked her head in thought. He had a point. Ben kissed her head. "I love you." He whispered. "Do you know that?"

Mal smiled. "Yes." She agreed, turning towards him. She got on her knees on the couch as she put her hands around his head. "And I love you." She promised. Maleficent hissed again, and Ben raised his eyebrows. "Okay, I can take a hint." He told his mother-in-law with arms raised. Then, with a smirk towards Mal, he swept the purple-haired queen off of the couch and into his arms. Maleficent hissed again, even louder. Mal yelped as Ben began to carry her in the direction of their bedroom. "We'll just continue this in here." He called over his shoulder. Maleficent's last hiss was cut off as Ben closed the door with his foot.

"You didn't turn off the light." Mal reprimanded as he set her down on their bed, resting his hands beneath her hips and his forehead against hers as he did. "And the door to the hall isn't locked."

Ben groaned. "Can't you do it from a distance?" He asked as he pulled off her shoes and set them on the floor. "With magic?" He pleaded.

Mal smirked. "Lights off, without a doubt; keep us in and lock them out!" She tried. Underneath the door, the lights went out and they heard the lock slide from the other room. Ben looked incredibly impressed. She laughed. "First try!" She cheered as he slipped off his own shoes and took her face in one of his hands. "You know, if you stayed, you could see me do that, like, every day."

Ben laughed. He leaned forward and stole a long, sweet kiss from her. His tongue skimmed her
lower lip. Mal's hands started to explore up under his shirt and around his arms. He put his hands on her waist and pulled her close to him. "Believe me when I tell you that there are far different things I'd like to see you do besides turning on and off lights." He laughed against her mouth.

"I'm here," Mal told him. Her mouth was stretched out into a smile. "And I don't think I'm going anywhere else."

"Hmm." Ben hummed aloud. He buried his nose in her collarbone and inhaled the smell of her. "You tell me when to quit, and I will," He promised as he began to undo his shirt and slide his belt out of its loops.

Mal rolled her eyes. She used her new spell to turn off the lights in the bedroom and he started to put his hands on her. Their rings clicked together in the darkness. Beautiful warmth spread out from her belly, making her want him harder than she'd ever wanted anything before. It didn't matter that it might hurt. It didn't matter that so much had already happened today. She just knew, as he pulled fabric off of her, that she needed to feel like she had last night, again. Ben's kisses became sloppy, landing on her eyes and the corners of her face, and his touches lit fire beneath her skin that forced her eyes closed. She only saw in flashes of vision after that; clothes on the floor, skin in the pale light, and Ben's beautiful eyes teasing her from a distance. She wanted to feel like this all the time.

Mal sat outside the master bedroom beside the door. The Fairy Godmother was inside, examining her mom. Mal was wasting time on her phone, alternating between the news apps and the castle page. Adam's page had fallen mostly unused since Ben became king, while Belle's was filled with her normal book lists and now, with pictures of Madison.

Mal got the vibe that no one was sure what to think of Madison. Belle and Adam's adoption papers were going to be finalized the following week, and everyone in the castle was beyond excited. Even Mal. She'd posted dozens of selfies with her, Ben, Belle, Adam, Sophia, and Stewart crowding around Madison. The pictures got high likes, and many commented on the child's exquisite beauty, but there were still some in Auradon who were wondering where she'd come from and what she was going to do in the palace. Especially knowing that Maleficent was off the Isle, even in lizard form, the news was shocking. Many people were back to thinking Mal was ten steps away from throwing over the monarchy for bringing her lizardly mother to Auradon, though the protestors that had mostly diminished over the months had not resurfaced.

A couple of people had complained over the fact the Fairy Godmother's wand wouldn't work in Auradon anymore. A lot of people didn't really understand basic concepts of magic and had no idea why exactly the wand wouldn't work inside the Isle, but Mal didn't really feel the need to explain it all at the moment. Maybe later. Just not now.

The door to the bedroom opened and the Fairy Godmother herself stepped up. She looked down at Mal and saw the news screen open on her phone. "Anything good?" She asked.

Mal groaned. "All about us, as per usual. Not a lot of it isn't nice, so no. It's more bad than good."

Fairy Godmother grimaced. "Well, I'm afraid I'm about to give you more bad news." She told Mal.

Mal's jaw fell slack. The Fairy Godmother propped the door open with her toe. Mal got to her feet and slipped inside in front of the Fairy Godmother. On the center table in front of the TV was Maleficent's terrarium, with its sole occupant sitting in the center, underneath the light. Most of Maleficent's black scales had withered away into grey and then fallen off. Blood leaked from her skin when she moved in the slightest. The poor lizard looked miserable.
Fairy Godmother led Mal to the couch and sat her down with a deep breath. She gestured to Maleficent with one upraised hand. "What do you know about Magical Poisoning, Mal?" She asked.

Mal blinked in shock. "Nothing." She admitted. The term was completely new to her.

Fairy Godmother let out a deep breath. "It's pretty awful stuff." She admitted, wringing her hands. "Magical poisoning is damaged, dangerous magic. It occurs when you interact with too much bad magic, or hurt yourself using magic, or when it's being used irresponsibly. It affects both Magicals and non-Magicals, though in very different ways. For non-magical people, like Ben, for example, there would be horrible sicknesses involved. The magic festers under their skin and burns them out from the inside, mutating with blood and organs. But for magical people like you and Maleficent, it largely depends on how and where you use your magic. Magic requires exercise even if only in small degrees. Not only has Maleficent been unable to practice her magic for upwards of thirty years, but she has also been disconnected from it. I assume when the barrier went down, and the ability filled her once more, she overdid it horribly. Changing shape is not a simple matter. She burned too much at once, and from what I can tell, hurt herself beyond repair."

"Beyond repair?" Mal repeated. Her hands felt cold and clammy.

The Fairy Godmother leaned forward and put her hand on Mal's hand. "Your mother is dying," She whispered. "Because she is damaged, her magic is not working correctly and is becoming polluted. Polluted magic to any degree is dangerous, as it was for the moorlands and its inhabitants. In this case, however, there is no renewal ceremony that can save her. Maleficent is dying, and there's nothing anyone can do."

Mal clasped her hand to her mouth like she was going to throw up and took several sharp inhales. "Can I take her to the Isle again?" She begged.

"I doubt it would work." The Fairy Godmother shook her head. "She's already very far gone."

Mal threaded her fingers through her hair and tugged lightly at her scalp. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself to remain at some semblance of a calm. "Okay." She sighed. "Is there anything else I need to know?" She asked.

Fairy Godmother shook her head. "Nothing." She stood and headed for the door without a departing sentiment. Mal too, remained silent as the door closed. She looked at her mother and watched the lizard breathe in and out, as slow as could be done. Mal could see Maleficent was in pain.

Mal got down on the floor next to her mom's cage and laid her head on the table. The lizard made no movements aside from breathing.

"Hi, mom," Mal whispered softly. Tears immediately pricked her eyes, though she wasn't sure why she was suddenly sad. It wasn't like her mom had cared when she'd sent her daughter to Auradon with strangers. Why should she care now?

But Mal knew the answer to that question. She wasn't her mother; she'd been raised around suffering and knew what pain felt like. And because of that knowledge, she sought to guard everyone else against it. But this was something she couldn't fix.

"I'm sorry." Mal coughed. "I wish there was something I could do. But the Fairy Godmother says there isn't."
Maleficent opened one tiny eye and closed it again. Mal got the feeling that, if her mother had been a human instead of a lizard, she would have just rolled her eyes at her distressed daughter. Mal straightened back up and sniffled. It was still early. She had things she needed to do. Most importantly, return to the Isle of the Lost. She didn't suppose any of the magical kids would have magical poisoning since they hadn't had the chance to grow into their potential as they got older, but, hopefully, the older villains with magic, like Dr. Facilier and Ursula, weren't gasping for breath and wondering what was going on.

She grabbed her isle jacket on the way out and wiped the remnants of the tears out of her eyes. On her way down the stairs, Mal had the inspiration to text Audrey, whose number she'd gotten from Ben. "I'm heading down to the dock to take a ship to the Isle." She wrote. "If you're interested, I can wait for you?"

Before she'd even made it to the front door, Audrey had texted back: "Yes! I'll be there!"

As Mal reached for the door, she heard someone yell behind her. "Mal!"

She looked up the stairs and stopped when she saw Ben in a short-sleeved blue polo shirt. Madison was cradled into his arm as he dashed down the steps. Her heart warmed up a bit as she saw him speeding towards her. "Hey!" He called. "Hold on! We were just coming out to find you. Are you headed out to the Isle?"

"Yeah," Mal said softly. Ben skidded to a stop a few feet in front of her. He smiled brightly for a few seconds and then examined her. His smile faded.

"You're sad." He commented as he took a few steps forward and touched her arm. "Fairy Godmother give you bad news?"

Mal nodded and took Madison out of Ben's arms to give her sister a hug. Belle had dressed Madison in little purple yoga pants with a yellow shirt and a pretty white bobble necklace around her tiny neck. She had the tiniest socks Mal had ever seen on and was cooing happily as she gnawed on her left fist. Ben didn't wait for her to give Madison back before he picked Mal up and swept her off her feet into a giant hug. "Tell me." He whispered.

Mal laughed as her feet found the floor again. She passed Madison back to Ben. "My mom has this thing called magical poisoning. In simple terms, we cut her off from magic for thirty years, and then we gave it back to her too fast. It's like an overworked muscle but way worse. Fairy Godmother says she'll die, and there's nothing she told me that works to stop it."

Ben's face fell. "Oh, Mal…" he trailed off. He used the hand that wasn't busy balancing Madison to pull Mal into his chest. "I'm so sorry." He whispered into her hair.

"It's okay," Mal mumbled. She wrapped her arms around him and took a deep breath. "I mean… I don't really need her in my life. She wasn't the best mom. And I have Belle, and you…"

Ben shook his head. "You only get one mom." He whispered.

Mal snorted. "Unless you marry a man raised by angels." She pointed out. She flicked Ben's nose playfully. Ben laughed half-heartedly. Mal began to walk towards the doors.

"Oh!" Ben exclaimed. "I almost forgot to tell you that… we're arranging for an emergency council meeting."

Mal stopped with the door open and one foot outside the threshold. "Council meeting?" She asked.
Ben nodded with a wince. "Basically all of the royals here in the castle so we can discuss what's going on with Jack's country before we reveal to the country what's going on. Technically, you don't have to attend since this is Auradon stuff. They'll start to arrive the week you leave for the moors. Want to sit through it all with me?"

Mal made a repulsed face. "No thank you!" She declared. "You can deal with your kingdom by yourself."

Mal laughed as Ben groaned pitifully. "Bye hun." She said as she slipped out. The door thudded shut behind her.

"Bye." He called with a sigh, turning to head back up the steps. He bounced Madison in his arms lightly and laughed as she cooed up at him. "You're pretty cute." He told her. "You're almost as cute as my wife." He winked at the child conspiratorially and laughed when she gurgled in return.

Chapter End Notes

With the sunset fading rapidly behind her, Mal lit the torch. Everyone backed away respectfully. Ben stepped up behind the pyre and put his hands on Maleficent's head. He smoothed her hair back around her horns as he straightened his back. Mal had no idea what sort of goodbyes he had to say to a villainess who had almost cost him his crown, but she kept quiet as he backed away two or three small steps.

"Lady Maleficent." He announced, immediately capturing the crowd's attention. He stood tall as he spread an arm over her mother's dead body. "Mistress and Embodiment of all Evil. Fairy Witch. Ruler of the Forbidden Mountains, Supreme Leader of the Goblins, Founder and Leader of the Council of Villains. Protector of the Moors. Captive of the Greater Isle of the Lost. She was born and raised here, in the moorland. Upon the age of twenty-four, she rose to be a villainess who closed off the moors and wreaked havoc on the neighboring kingdom, now present-day Auroria." Ben gave a short nod to King Phillip and Queen Aurora. "After being assumed dead with former King Stefan for many years after the discovery of his body, she appeared to lead the villains' side in the War of Villainy. She suffered two of the Unspeakable Punishments of Auradon upon the defeat of Villainy and the unification of the Kingdoms of Auradon. She resided on the Isle of the Lost for thirty years and is succeeded by her two beautiful daughters." Ben paused to smile over his shoulder at Mal. "In my unbiased opinion." He added. The crowd chuckled softly. Mal let out a short laugh. Ben returned his gaze to the gathered and concluded: "May her spirit rest in peace hereafter."

"Amen." Chorused a large portion of the crowd. Mal sniffled and focused her gaze on the pearlescent barrier above everyone's heads.

Ben dropped his arm and twiddled his thumbs together. "On a more personal, non-official remark, I'd like to share something with you all. When I first began to prepare something to say at-" He paused and gestured towards Maleficent. "-My Mother-in-law's funeral, I asked Mal, my lovely, talented, thoughtful wife, what she thought her mom's greatest accomplishments were." Ben paused again and looked at the ground as tears misted his eyes. "And she told me… without hesitation, that her mother's greatest accomplishment was having her sister, Madison, who is also here with us tonight."
Ben waved a little to the infant in Belle's arms, who was dressed in a little yellow dress with a daisy clip in her hair. Ben took two paces forward and clasped his hands behind his back. "And while I agree wholeheartedly that Madison is one of the brightest rays of sunshine in the dark abyss of Maleficent's world, the same should be verbally extended to cover her older daughter, Mal. I want you all to know that I have an infinite respect to Maleficent for raising my wife."
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Mal and Audrey complete work on the Isle of the Lost

Chapter Notes

It has come to my attention that this story is long. Really long. Longer than any of the Harry Potter Books, the Percy Jackson Novels, the Twilight Saga, Narnia, the Hobbit, or the Book of Mormon. I'm making an effort to cut back on words, though I still have a few more things to add.

Mal hopped down the steps and brushed her ripped-up jeans off. She was wearing a short-sleeved purple exercise shirt that clung to her skin. It wasn't very practical for wings, Mal thought as she moved her hands above her head to see how far the shirt moved up on her waist. Maybe she could get Evie to design some fashionable shirts with holes in the back. She could, of course, rip and heal the fabric as her wings grew in and out, but it took a few extra seconds to get started and going.

With a little thought, her wings materialized from her back and she lifted off the ground. She soared upwards, trusting her wings and her fae instincts to carry her forward. Then she thrust herself forward in the sky and began to make her trip to the docks.

The air was still warm and sticky from the hot August sun, but it felt nice to whoosh over the trees, roads, and people below. Mal couldn't go that high due to air quality and the ever- looming prospect of falling. Therefore, she stuck to a reasonable height above the ground, where people couldn't easily recognize her and where she could see where she was going.

As Mal neared the docks, she saw her little ship waiting in the harbor to take her to the Isle. A long stretch car was nearby. Mal landed behind a building and quickly retracted her wings. She peered around the corner of the building she'd landed behind and crept outside.

Down the road was the long stretch car she had seen from the sky. Aurora and Phillip were hovering near the open door. Audrey was standing a few feet away, with a bag slung over her shoulder and a bright smile. She had braided her hair down her back and was wearing a tank top with thick straps over her shoulders. Her legs were mostly covered by capris, which were loose enough to be rolled up more if needed. She looked like a normal beach-goer instead of a princess. Mal felt a surge of pride.

"Hi, Mal!" Audrey smiled when she spotted the purple fairy coming down the path. She raised a hand and waved.

"Hey, Audrey!" Mal smiled. She raised her hand for a high-five as she approached the older girl. Audrey accepted. Mal turned her attention to the king and queen waiting anxiously near the car door like they wanted to hop in and drive away but weren't sure what to do. "Is everything okay?" Mal asked.
"Oh, yes." Aurora nodded. "We're seeing her off. We wanted to wait until you got back to leave."
She bit her lip as she looked her daughter up and down. "Audrey's very excited to go back." She
said. "But I'm a bit nervous. Will she be safe?"

"Mom," Audrey groaned and rolled her eyes.

"Yes," Mal confirmed. "We'll be in the city, and there's no crime or danger there. Right now, we're
just helping people get set up. She'll be completely safe."

Aurora visibly relaxed. "Okay." She said, sounding much more sure of herself. "I trust you." She
told Mal. Aurora put a hand on Phillip's shoulder. "She'll be fine." She told her husband. Her voice
was strong and powerful. Mal blinked. It was almost like Aurora was trying to charm speak. She
must have picked it up in the moors.

Phillip nodded. He stepped away from the car and wrapped his big arms around Audrey. He kissed
the crown of her head and whispered: "I love you, come home soon."

"I will, papa." Audrey giggled. "I love you." She squeezed him tightly.

Phillip let the ghost of a smile slip across his face and murmured something back to her. They
separated, and Audrey waved as both of her parents slipped into the car and the car began to drive
off. When it had vanished around the end of the road, Audrey let out a deep sigh. Mal raised an
eyebrow. "You sure everything's okay?" She asked.

"Yeah." Audrey nodded. "Actually… it's great. The funniest thing – ever since I got back from the
Isle, I've been… lighter somehow."

"Oh?" Mal asked. "That is funny, considering we almost died two or three times last time."

"Maybe we can raise that count to four this time around." Audrey laughed, which surprised Mal
more than anything, but she tried to quickly brush it off. Mal gestured dramatically to the end of
the wharf, where a little ship waited to take them to the Isle. "How did you get here so fast?"
Audrey asked as they approached the gangplank and began to climb onto the ship.

"I flew," Mal explained nonchalantly.

"You can fly?" Audrey asked. She didn't sound surprised, only curious.

"I have wings." Mal nodded. "They're purple and feathery. I usually wear them in the moorlands."

"Can I see?" Audrey asked.

Mal shrugged. As they stopped on the boat deck and crew members began to rush to and fro, she
pulled her hair out of the way and turned around. Audrey hummed in mild surprise as Mal let her
wings grow out. The princess drew a hand down the dark purple and Mal was pleased when the
touch didn't bring tears to her eyes. They were growing stronger and less sensitive. And they were
growing longer too if she wasn't wrong.

"So, why don't you just fly to the Isle?" Audrey asked.

"Not strong enough yet," Mal said, drawing a wing around her arm like a large, feathery blanket.
She rubbed the stiff feathers along the top of the wing and resisted the urge to giggle at the tickling
sensation. "I've been working on making them stronger, but I don't want to push them that far until
I know I won't fall into the ocean and die."
The boat moved off of the harbor and Mal and Audrey both swayed, then continued talking as if nothing had happened. "So, in theory, when the Jolly Roger was sideways, and you were hanging off the side, you wouldn't have died because you had wings?" Audrey asked.

"In theory." Mal shrugged. "But that would have made it easier for my mom to knock me out. She couldn't knock me off the ship without killing her allies as well. And Uma would have flown into a rage. I think the fact I was both magical and about to fall off the ship drew a lot of attention from you guys and kept the other pirates from going after you."

Audrey walked to the end of the ship and watched the water crest around the ship's edge. "I owe you my life." She said softly. "I don't know if I can ever repay you for that."

"Jay said the same thing to Ben." Mal shrugged. "So, allow me to steal my husband's words." She cleared her throat. "Don't worry about it. It would be more than enough just for me to see you happy."

Audrey chuckled. "I used to think I wouldn't be able to be happy without Ben, but I'm beginning to think the Isle changed my thinking. When you told me that Ben would be proud of me, that was nice of course, but I thought: 'I'm proud of me! This is wicked cool!'" Both Mal and Audrey laughed. "The point is..." Audrey continued, pausing to put her chin on her hand and to peer out towards the Isle. "I feel a lot happier with myself. I haven't been this happy in months. Maybe years. So... thank you. Thanks for putting me in group one and saving my life when that man started shooting at us. You changed me."

Mal didn't say anything. She just smiled and patted Audrey's shoulder. "The world has a funny way of giving us what we need." She said. She grabbed a rope that was strung from the lookout post down to the ship railing and used it to climb up onto the railing. "Me, for example? I didn't know I needed Belle."

"Belle?" Audrey asked. "What about Ben?"

"Ben is a nice addition to getting Belle as a mother-in-law," Mal said seriously. She held a straight-mouthed expression for several seconds before she burst into giggles. Audrey laughed with her.

After about thirty more minutes, the captain called: "Land ho!" as they passed through the barrier onto the Isle. It had only been a few days, but thin, wispy clouds were already starting to collect in the greater area of the Isle. Soon, the Isle would again be overshadowed. She'd make sure that the air would never again be as it were. Mal looked out over the beach, where people were splashing and running about. She needed to start helping everyone get their lives together now.

"Our first business of order." Mal told Audrey, "Is to hunt down the Deavor girls and ask if there's anything we can get for the citizens."

"Okay." Audrey nodded determinedly.

Mal examined her partner and smirked. "We should get you a citizenship card." She said to Audrey.

Audrey's eyes lit up. "Can I have one?" She asked.

"Sure." Mal shrugged. "You'll have the starting amount of points and your own apartment on the very top floor."

"Cool." Audrey agreed.
Mal smiled. The ship began to pull into the small harbor that had been built when they'd first started construction and the crew rushed around to start the docking process. Strewn around the deck were numerous packages of various sizes for the Isle of the Lost. A few were probably things Mal had ordered for the Isle, but others would be donations from Auradonians. Mal felt a surge of pride for her husband's citizens.

As soon as the gangplank was lowered, Audrey and Mal slipped off. People waved and called to both of them as they wove their way towards the government building. The barrier looked a pretty pink above the walls before it became translucent against the bright blue sky. Although people were still allowed to go back and forth, no one had traveled to and fro since the Auradonian volunteers had vacated.

Mal held the door open for Audrey as they slipped inside. Inside, Evelyn Deavor was typing away on her screen while Eliza spoke to a small group a few feet away. Evelyn looked up at the sound of the door closing and put her tablet down with a smile when she saw Mal and Audrey.

"Why, it's two of my favorite people!" Evelyn smiled. "How can I help you, your majesties?"

"Just Audrey." Audrey corrected before Mal could open her mouth. "Do you have any idea of things that we need to buy from Auradon to start things up around here? School supplies and such?"

Evelyn smiled. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that anyway. Robert Callahan, who was allowed into the city before the whole 'Dragon Trip', has offered to teach classes. He says he has about thirty years' worth of Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Engineering, Robotics, and Math classes, the like. He said that, if you'll employ him, he'd be willing to hold classes in his own apartment or outside so that people can gain educations in those fields."

"I want a course description and synapse," Mal said immediately. "I want to make sure people get the education they need, and that he won't just say he'll teach them and pass them off. Those are high-level courses, though. Is there anyone else I might be able to ask to teach subjects for smaller children?"

"Not many," Evelyn admitted. "Cruella might have been able to do business, but she's still on the greater part of the Isle. Plenty of people can do magic, I'd be willing to teach design as a part-time thing, but…" Evelyn trailed off, biting her cheek.

"I get it." Mal sighed. "I'll talk to Hiro Hamada in Auradon and see what sort of resources he has for us. What do we need as far as school supplies?"

"Well…” Evelyn chewed her lip in thought. "We could go the traditional route with paper and pencils. Or… we could bring in screens for everyone that they could just carry through their school years. Try them to their cards. Turn in their assignments with a few taps. Greater student collaboration that way."

Mal's shoulder slumped in thought. "Yeah, but it's more money that way." She sighed. "I don't the Isle to get more into debt than we already have. I understand you need some things, but I can't just borrow from Auradon forever."

"Well, think of it this way," Evelyn said. "Spend money on paper and pencils for the next twenty years until you do have enough money to switch or start out with school-appointed tablets, which will cut cost on textbooks, utensils, the like. This way kids can't smuggle things as easily into their schoolrooms too. When they graduate, wipe the tablet down, erase the data, and hand it to the next person."
Mal sighed. "That does make sense." She admitted. "I'll bounce Ideas off Ben and figure out which will cost more in the long-run. Maybe Hiro will have tips on that as well. For now, though, our goals are finding someone who can teach younger students, and who can teach things like English and writing."

"I can." Audrey volunteered, raising her hand up beside her cheek. "I don't have a teaching license or anything, but I could totally teach an English class. I got my associates degree back while I was still at Auradon Prep, and I finished my bachelor's last summer."

"Fantastic," Mal said. "I don't know what either of those are, but it sounds like you have an idea of what to do. Would you be okay to teach? You do still live in Auradon."

Audrey bit her cheek in thought. "I think I can make it work." She decided. "When should we start?"

"As soon as possible," Mal told her. "I love that the citizens are having so much fun, but I didn't build this city so that everyone could have it for free. I told Ben we would pay our dues back as soon as we could."

"We've already started." Evelyn cut in. She pressed a few buttons on her tablet and whirled it around to show Mal. "Inter-citizen trade has been going on since the Auradonians left. People with magic have been in-home healing and fixing items for a small fee, people have started up in-home and separate shops, and a small construction team is gathering to allow people to pay them to build new structures while also accepting commissions from us. I've already started putting things into blueprints for them."

Mal's face broke out into a smile. This was the best news she'd had in a long, long time.

"Of course-" Evelyn cut off as she turned her screen back around. "our little government is creating more money than people are using to buy and sell but give it a few months for everyone to feel more comfortable with what they have and you'll have yourself a little monopoly. Hopefully by the end of the January after this coming one-" Evelyn made little stacking motions with her hands to describe her meaning. "You can stop creating new points out of thin air and use the money you have in your system, accounting for inflation of population and the natural rise of trade between Auradon and the Isle, of course."

Mal shook her head. "You're a genius." She told Evelyn. "What would I do without you?"

"Do this all yourself, I bet." Evelyn shrugged. "But hey, it gives me a purpose!"

"So... you're basically creating money out of thin air?" Audrey asked doubtfully.

"Yeah." Mal shrugged. "Everyone had a starting amount on their cards. People who come to me and ask for work can get more points added to their cards based on a stipend. Like Evelyn here." Mal gestures to Evelyn, who smiled and made a peace sign with her fingers. "We have food coming from Auradon still, but as soon as we get things going, I'll put a stop to that."

"I have someone who might be able to run a store or something for you." Evelyn declared. "And, at the same time, a request to garrison."

Every muscle in Mal's body tensed. "Request to garrison?" She asked slowly.

Evelyn's fingers flew up and down her screen. When she turned it around, the face of a very familiar pirate was onscreen.
"Harry?" Mal gasped. Beside her, Audrey clutched her purse and looked alarmed.

"Well, what did you expect?" Evelyn asked with an eye roll. "He's in love – you said it on TV yourself."

Mal's fingers went numb. "Uma." She let out a breath. "But... she doesn't remember him anymore."

She turned to Audrey, white-faced and shaking. "What should I do?"

Audrey shrugged. "I don't know, but I trust you."

That didn't help. It wasn't an answer. If only being Queen of a land and a system you created came with a manual someone else had come up with. Mal exhaled. "Is there any way I can talk to him?"

Evelyn made a distant gesture towards where the city's gate was located. "He's been outside ever since you left. I only spoke to him yesterday, but he's camping there and asking everyone who comes close to fetch Uma for him. Desperation."

Mal lifted a hand and pressed it to her collarbone as she thought. "Has he... eaten?" She asked.

Evelyn shrugged. "Probably not. He's probably thinking to stay there and starve until he sees her."

Mal exhaled and looked back at Audrey. "Let's go see him." She decided. Audrey nodded. "Thank you, Evelyn." Mal squeezed her hand. "If you can, gather a list of bare essentials we need to get schools and certain businesses running, and we'll go from there."

"Wifi," Evelyn answered automatically. "This place would fly a lot quicker if they could look things up. Just saying." She held her hands up in defense as Mal nodded. "I'll look into what's going on and start organizing crews," Evelyn promised.

"Thank you," Mal repeated. She and Audrey began to back away. Evelyn waved as they slipped back outside. As the sunshine hit their faces, they began to speed-walk across the ground to the gate. Neither passed through, but they both peered around at the dark and gloomy expanse outside of the city. The clouds were gathering more steadily now, and it would only be a matter of time before the greater part of the Isle was completely overcast, just like before.

"Harry?" Audrey called suspiciously.

"Aye." A croak came from just behind the wall. Mal stepped out of the barrier, fully confident in her ability to perform magic and defend herself, to look around. A figure was slumped about three yards past the opening, leaning on the Wall. A pirate's hat was on the ground next to him, and he was twisting his hands nervously.

Mal walked over, which prompted Audrey to leave the safety of the barrier and follow her. Her blue and brown sneakers left even prints in the moist dirt. Mal knelt down a short distance from Harry. His skin was white and pasty, and he had deep bags under his eyes. He was covered in bruises. Dark seawater was dried in sticky black sheets on his skin. He must have fallen into the water during the battle. Mal's gut twisted. "You look awful." She told him.

Harry chuckled and grimaced simultaneously. "I can't sleep." He whispered.

"Where's your hook?" Mal asked. "How did you get out of the water?"

"It wasn't so bad wi' the tide coming in," Harry coughed. "Yer king threw it in that water. Some nobility you have in Auradon."
Mal sat back on her butt, stunned. Ben couldn't have known that the water was dangerous to even touch; that it would swallow you up. She swallowed. "Harry..." She trailed off.

Harry interrupted her. "I crawled up and she was gone. They brought her here. Please, please tell me she's happy? You ain't holding her?" His dark eyes were boring holes into Mal's soul.

"She's okay," Mal nodded. "She broke her back when she fell on the ship. I healed her, and we brought her here, but Harry-" She leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. A layer of grime fell off and stuck to her fingers. "She agreed to have her memories erased. She didn't want to remember the pain. She doesn't remember anything about the Isle anymore."

Harry pulled away. "You lie." He said softly, though he was already curling up into himself. "You've always lied." He shook his head and buried his head in his arms.

"I did what I had to do," Mal sighed, squeezing her eyes closed. "So, you've seen her then?"

He didn't move, and his voice was muffled because of his arms. "She walked past a couple of times with Drizella's daughter. Her hair looks nice. She finally took it out of all them braids... cut them off at her shoulders and let it fluff out in the sun."

"I haven't been able to see her yet." Mal sighed. "I'm sure she looks great." She examined Harry as she navigated different solutions in her head. "Listen, I can't let you in as you are. I feel bad for you, I do, but she needs to find out who she is without the villainy. It wouldn't be fair for me to expect you to not tell her. She exhaled. "And, on top of that, you fought against us. You made your choice. Once you get her back, will you really stay away from villainy?"

Harry didn't move. Mal wrung her hands as the silence intensified. Finally, she continued. "I can do an equal deal for what I did for her. If you allow me, I'll erase your memories of the Isle, introduce you to yourself as the son of Captain Hook. You can keep your possessions, and I'll reintroduce you to Uma. And then, maybe in a year or so, I'll let you have them all back, and you can make the decision to leave or stay. I didn't come to fight, so for once, do something right for yourself."

Harry moved his head back upwards, though it was clear he didn't have the strength to do much. "You can do that?" He asked suspiciously.

"I'll even sign a contract," Mal told him. "You pick a day – any day after this time next year, and it'll say "Mal is required to return all of Harry Hook's memories on month-day-time-place, and I'll do it. You can put that paper on record and keep a copy with you, and I swear on my Mother's grave I will do it."

Harry took a deep breath and broke into coughs. Small spots of blood appeared in his hand as he covered his mouth. Mal stared. "You're sick." She said plainly.

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "Opening up the barrier brought some nasty stuff over. Almost everyone is sick. Ursula, Jafar, Facilier...."

"Magical Poisoning." Mal's eyes filled with tears. "They'll be okay, the barrier wasn't open for long, but...."

"But what?" Audrey asked. She covered her mouth in horror. "Your mom! She's in Auradon!"

Mal nodded as Harry wiped the remaining blood off his chin with a solemn attitude. "She's dying." She whispered, eyeing a tuft of Harry's hair that looked like it was about to fall out. "You're probably sick from the water, though," She told Harry. "Has anyone else ever come out of it?"
Harry shrugged. "No way ter tell." He tried to lift his arm but didn't have the strength to.

Mal put a hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to come inside?" She asked.

Harry stared ahead blankly for several seconds. He paused for so long Mal almost panicked. He looked like he might have died. But then he cleared his throat and nodded.

Mal turned to Audrey. "Fetch me a paper, please?" She asked. Audrey dropped her purse to the dirty ground and began to rummage. She quickly pulled out a blank pad of paper and a pen. Mal scribbled on it just as she'd said and turned the paper to Harry. Harry lifted the pen and wrote: January 22. A year and a half away. He signed his name and returned it to Mal.

"It's my birthday." He whispered. "I don't want to forget it."

Mal nodded. She ripped off the paper and returned the pad and pen to Audrey before she returned the paper to Harry. He folded it in fourths and held onto it tightly. "Can you move?" She asked Harry. He shook his head.

With Audrey and Mal's help, Harry managed to lay himself down on the ground. Mal smoothed his greasy hair as best she could and pressed her hands to the top of his scalp. "Be clean, be whole, of body and soul." She commanded softly.

Harry's body began to mend and straighten out of its own accord. Audrey and Mal both watched – tight-lipped – as Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ready?" Mal asked.

Harry grit his teeth and nodded.

"No more sorrow, no more fantasy. Relieve your pain and no more memory." Mal repeated, just as she had for Uma. Harry looked around wildly, in panic, and then abruptly relaxed. His eyes fluttered closed, just like Uma's had, and he went straight to sleep. Mal didn't let him sleep for long. She shook him carefully, and after a few seconds, Harry's eyes opened again.

"Hello?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Hello," Mal said. "I'm Mal. I'm the queen of the city inside this wall, and of the Island that we're on."

"Oh. That's cool." Harry furrowed his brow.

"You're Harry Hook," Mal said, laying a hand down on Harry's arm. "You won't remember for a little while because you and I agreed it would be better to forget and I took those memories away. Do you see that paper in your hand?"

Harry unfolded the paper and looked at it. "January twenty-second." He read.

"That's the day I'll give you your memories back," Mal promised. "It's also your birthday." She winked conspiratorially.

Harry, to her surprise, blushed. "Okey." He slurred.

"I have someone you asked me to introduce you to," Mal said, very seriously. "You loved them very much. They're why you wanted to come into the city in the first place."

Harry looked between her and Audrey. "Is it you?" He asked Mal.
Mal blinked in surprise. "Oh, um, no it's not, I'm sorry."

Harry looked at Audrey. "Is it you?" He asked.

Audrey shook her head with a sad smile. Mal put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "They're like you." She told him. "She doesn't remember you either, but you two loved each other very much. We're going to go find her right now." Harry nodded. Mal got to her feet and helped him up. He swayed a bit, then went back to being the same steady pirate Mal had always known.

Mal guided Harry to the entrance slowly. "People might ask you about things that happened on the Isle, or about your dad. It's okay to tell them that you don't know."

"Is my dad inside?" Harry asked.

Mal shook her head. "I'm sorry, no." She didn't tell Harry that Captain Hook was still on this part of the Isle. He'd probably figure that out on his own and hopefully would have the sense to not go looking for his past. "When you get your memories back, you'll remember what he was like."

Harry nodded. Mal stepped inside of the barrier, but Audrey and Harry were momentarily trapped outside since the barrier had been sealed to those who didn't have a card.

The blank cards had been sealed into the wall. Only Mal could remove them now that the moor-women had gone home. She selected a dark red card and a hot pink card and presented them to Harry and Audrey. They quickly shook hands on conditions before Mal pulled them back to where they'd left Evelyn. Audrey officially received her top-most apartment room and Harry got one strategically placed across from Uma's, diagonal from Anastasia and Dizzy. Then they led him down to the beach, where most of the island socialized. They quickly found Anastasia and Dizzy doing basic haircuts in the surf and gathering the cut hair up with thin nets so that it wouldn't stick to the surfers. Audrey left her bag on the beach beside their supplies. A short way away, Uma was standing in the waist-deep water, observing with careless surprise how she could bend the sea to her will.

Mal stepped into the surf. "Uma!" She called.

Uma looked up. Like Harry had described, she'd unbraided her hair. It had been cut even shorter than he'd claimed. It was in pretty turquoise beach waves, going no further than mid-neck length. Streaks of white made the blue seem bright and colorful. She was wearing a turquoise tank-top that looked Auradonian. Thousands of brand-new sun kisses dotted her browned nose and arms.

Harry looked amazed as Mal pulled him by the upper arm to face Uma. "Harry, this is Uma. Uma, Harry." Mal introduced.

Harry sucked in a breath. "I know ye." He whispered. Uma looked equally interested. Her dark eyes traced Harry's arms as a little smile crept onto her face.

"I know neither of you remembers, but you were very important to each other before you came here," Mal explained, glancing between the two. "I wanted to introduce you to each other."

Uma held out a hand to shake, muscles rippling in the sun, but Harry only took it to hold it. His thumb ran over her knuckles. "I know why I loved you." He whispered.

Uma laughed. "You don't seem bad." She told him, nodding her approval to her new friend.

Mal backed away. She felt as if she were intruding on an extremely private moment. "If you have any questions, Harry, feel free to either ask me or anyone here. Don't lose your paper!" She
cautioned.

"Oh!" Harry said, glancing down at his paper. "I should take this to my apartment." He looked at Uma. "Will you come with me?"

"Sure." Uma nodded. "I'm still learning the ropes too. What building are you in?"

Mal didn't hear Harry answer, but she heard Uma exclaim: "That's the same one as me!"

Audrey and Mal laughed together as they watched the two romp up onto the beach and head towards the city. "Just imagine their surprise when they find where his room is." Audrey chuckled as she looked out over the bay.

"I think they'll be just fine." Mal agreed.

Audrey looked over at where Dizzy and Anastasia were cutting hair. "Hey, Dizzy?" She called. "How much are you costing?"

Dizzy looked up with a smile. "We're trying three points for any colors since people are still getting used to the points system. It'll probably go up when we start figuring things out. Haircuts are free today and tomorrow because so many people need them." She helped rinse out a small girl's new hair, who felt it and yelled in joy.

"Can you do me?" Audrey asked, picking up a lock of hair. "I just want some pink streaks in it."

"Yeah." Dizzy smiled cheerfully. "We don't have all the things we had in Grandma's shop, so it'll take a little longer, but it'll still work since it's hot outside." She pulled on a pair of black gloves and began to walk back to the beach. Audrey followed her and so did Mal, for lack of nothing else to do at the moment.

"Do I need to wet my hair down?" Audrey asked.

"Nope." Dizzy shook her head. "We just put it in and let it dry. Now, how do you want it?" Dizzy picked up a bucket of various colors to show Audrey off the sand. Audrey selected the pink and Mal examined the colors as Dizzy pulled on the gloves and set to work putting pink on the ends of Audrey's hair.

Mal discovered a sparkly gold color and held it up to the sun to see the colorful gel stain inside. "Pretty color, isn't it?" A soft voice came from behind her.

Mal jumped and whirled to see Anastasia behind her. "Oh no." She said as the blood ran out of her face. "Your husband… I completely forgot!" She wailed. She hid her face as she berated herself for her slip. "I'm so sorry." She told Anastasia.

"It's okay." Anastasia smiled. "You've been busy."

"Yes." Mal nodded. "But that's no excuse. I will find him."

Anastasia smiled and her cheeks turned pink in the sunlight. "Do you want that color?" She asked, nodding at the bottle in Mal's hand.

Mal reexamined the color. "I don't know." She said. "Do the sparkles stay in the gel, or do they wash away?"

"They stay." Anastasia nodded. It looks like gold paint. It's thin enough it coats the hair and stays,
and it can be done at different layers depending on how golden you want it.

Mal shrugged. "Can you do it in streaks? Like from the top of my head down?"

"Sure." Anastasia pulled some stained gloves out of her pocket and took the bottle out of Mal's hands. Mal turned awkwardly and sat in the surf with the waves lapping softly at her soaked clothes. Anastasia expertly separated Mal's hair and began to spread the color around Mal's head in moderate amounts. Within minutes, she had finished and left stunning gold streaks in Mal's long hair. Mal examined her reflection in the water's surface and decided it was time to return to the slightly curly locks she'd had back when she'd first went to Auradon.

"Nice." Audrey complimented her as she came to sit beside her. "I like the gold."

"I like the pink." Mal smiled. Audrey's hair was already starting to dry, but Mal's would be wet while the non-florescent color set.

Mal resisted the urge to pick at her hair. She wondered what Ben would think of it. If she decided she didn't like it after a few days, she could always cut it all off after the pixies grew it out.

"Okay." Dizzy said. She'd just finished scrubbing off her thick black gloves in the surf, which immediately set off warning bells in Mal's head. That stain couldn't be good for the beach. "We've only done this a few times. Mal probably knows more about it than we do. Do you have your cards?"

Audrey dug hers out of her pocket and held it out to Dizzy. We're charging three points." Dizzy told her.

Audrey nodded. "I know." She agreed. "You told me."

Dizzy nodded and moved her card closer to Audrey's. They swiped their cards past each others'. Audrey examined her card. There was a white square portion on the back that read the point balance. Audrey examined it. "Looks good." She said.

"Mine too." Dizzy smiled. They shook hands with smiles.

Mal held out her card to Anastasia. "Three?" She asked.

"Three." Anastasia nodded as she dug in her pocket for her card. As she looked, Mal pulled the card closer to her mouth and whispered a new number to it. Anastasia produced her card and they swiped without comment. Anastasia checked her balance on the back of the card. "I got seven extra points from you." She said with a frown. "Here." She held her card back out to re-swipe.

"Keep it." Mal shrugged. She carefully picked up a long lock of shiny golden hair and examined it. "You earned it. Besides, I'm supposed to be putting as much money as I can into the system for the next three months." She smirked at Audrey. "Also, I didn't know I could do that."

Mal put her card back in her pocket and sat back in the sun to wait for the gold to finish drying amongst all the purple. Audrey frowned at her. "Where's your phone?" Audrey asked.

"On the ship," Mal answered. She waved to a little boy who was sitting in the surf. Ever since the people from the Isle had first visited the beach, it'd been a popular spot. Another nice spot was the small park the Moor-women had grown before they'd left, with lots of pretty flowers, trees, and grass in irregular patterns. Mal supposed it was time to start thinking of making sure people could swim. "I need to get Evelyn a smartphone or something I can reach her by." She decided. She also needed Carlos to create an interweb.
"What's the idea now?" Audrey asked.

"Lots of the Isle kids can't swim. Like me? Totally cannot do the fish thing." Mal sighed. "Maybe it's time for us to start setting up things like that."

"Not yet," Audrey recommended. "Let them get their lives set up before we start bringing in extracurricular."

Mal sighed. "You're probably right. What I'm really worried about is when I have to leave, and you guys have to be by yourselves for a month. It worked well enough last time, but that was before we had the raid and two people lost their memories. Not going to lie – I'm a little nervous." She watched three kids go tumbling into the surf, laughing as they splashed and sent up mist around them.

"Oh, I'll watch them for you," Audrey offered, picking up a lock of hair and examining it.

"Really?" Mal asked, turning to raise her eyebrows at Audrey.

"Sure," Audrey agreed. "My parents are still in charge of Auroria anyways, and I won't be queen until I'm twenty-four."

"And you are?" Mal asked, scrunching her brow together.

"Twenty-two in November," Audrey explained.

"I thought Auradon coronations happened at twenty-two?" Mal asked, pulling her legs up. "Why twenty-four for you?"

"Auroria just does things differently. And yeah, the national minimum age is twenty-two." Audrey checked her nails blandly and then rubbed her scalp.

"Cool." Mal nodded, turning away again.

"When do you turn eighteen?" Audrey asked.

"Next January." Mal sighed. "If you want, while I'm gone, I'll tell the captain to wait for you every morning and you can come and go like I do. Just be there before ten and you're good."

"That'd be nice." Audrey agreed. The two girls sat in the surf and watched the Isle residents splash around them.

Audrey put her hand down in the wet sand and felt around in the soot until she came up with a beautiful round shell. "Argopectin." Someone said behind her as they plopped into the surf. Mal turned and let her eyes skim over the dark blue hair and dark eyes of the newcomer. It was Evan, Evie's brother. Behind him was Hades. Mal traced her dad's frame with her eyes as he stepped closer, hovering behind Evan. "Clams, scallops, and marine bivalve mollusks."

"Look at you." Mal laughed.

Evan shrugged with a carefree smirk. "Sorry to interrupt." He said. "How goes it in the land of royalty?"

"Well, you'd have to find a royal around here to answer that question," Mal declared, leaning her head back. "I'm off-duty."

"Does that mean I can't share with you my most recent finding?" Evan asked. "I finally figured out
who your dad is." He gestured with a thumb behind his shoulder to Hades, looking rather proud of his discovery. "You were one of the last ones I didn't know."

"I know him," Mal nodded, opening her eyes and raising her eyebrows. She waved at Hades. "But good job. How'd you figure it out?"

"Not using any bad way," Evan clarified, cheeks going a bit red. "I heard a rumor and then went and asked him."

"That's still so weird," Audrey complained. "Your kids are going to be the grandchildren of Belle, Beast, the Mistress of all Evil and the God of the Underworld. Also, don't you have a stepmom?"

"I've never met her, if I do," Mal shrugged. Hades didn't offer up any information on the subject, only watching as she leaned her head back. She closed her eyes against the sunshine and let out a sigh. "Technically, Uma would be my cousin or something. Poseidon's granddaughter through Triton. Poseidon would be my Uncle."

"That's right." Hades finally rumbled.

Mal turned her gaze to her dad. "Are you doing okay over here?" She asked. "It must be weird to be around people again."

Hades flicked his head to the side a little. "Not bad. Word is starting to spread and I'm getting lots of questions on you. I'm thinking I'm going to make instruments and sell them."

"You could put on shows, too." Mal nodded. "Hey, um, dad, what are you doing as far as using your powers?"

Hades raised an eyebrow. "You planning on taking my ember?" He asked.

Mal shook her head. "I have my own magic. I'm just thinking, in the long run, I don't want people living forever. At some point, everyone has to die."

Hades held up a hand. "I know that better than anyone." He informed her and then tilted his head. "Moorland magic can't bring people back from the dead though, right?"

Mal considered all the creatures and people in the moorland and shook her head. "I don't think so," She informed Hades. "I'd have to ask around and see."

"I was talking about you," Hades drawled, rolling his eyes. "With the Moor blessings?"

Mal furrowed her brow. She tried to remember all of the blessings that had been spelled on her head almost a year ago, and only a few faintly wisps came to mind. "The blessings help me talk with everyone and renew the magic cycling through, but I think that's about it."

Hades frowned deeply, a line cutting across his jaw as he squinted at her. His eyes grew a little dark. "That's not true," He refuted her. "Your mother told me a thing or two about those enchantments, and they do far more than just give you the ability to talk fancy. Maleficent was able to create a curse she didn't even have the power to break, remember?"

She considered this and tried a little harder to recall the blessings. 'Command' had been one, and 'renew' had been another. Then there was, of course, 'speak', the one she had used the most. Mal shuffled her feet around in the sand and shaded her eyes from the sunlight glinting off the waters. "I don't know," She decided. "I'll ask when I'm in the moorlands."
Hades nodded and then leaned down a little with a teasing light suddenly filling his eyes. "And speaking of death, is the king treating you well? I have room for his soul in my kingdom if he isn't." He held up his hand, nails painted a vivid blue, and pretended to examine them as if making sure they were up to the task of hauling Mal's husband straight down to Tartarus.

"He treats me more than well," Mal responded, rolling her eyes. "And to be clear, just so there aren't any misconceptions when we die you're going to let us go to the good place together, right?" Hades cracked a little smile, which Mal took as an affirmative answer, and then turned back to Evan. "How is writing all your knowledge down going?" She asked.

"It's busy," Evan informed her. "It's cool when people who didn't know learn, though."

Mal nodded and then furrowed her brow. "How did you start that?" She asked, turning to stare at him as he picked up another shell out of the sand. Evan turned it over in his hands and studied its outline before he managed to glance up and meet her gaze. He really did have beautiful eyes. Dark indigo and clear.

"I didn't set out thinking I'd kiss villains to learn about who had parented who, if that's what you're asking," Evan whispered. He put the shell back down and began sifting in the beach to find more. "Mom threw me out when she found out she was pregnant with E. I was six and I survived by stealing until I got a little too tall to sneak away. I wasn't like Jay, fast and agile. I had to sneak and I just got too tall to weave through crowds. I almost starved until someone told me they'd feed me in exchange for favors. That someone turned out to be Claude Frollo. After that, I was passed around as the 'pretty boy' until I was old enough to play the game myself." Evan stopped talking to scrub a little at the side of a broken shell, which withered away to crumbles in his hand. He swallowed visibly before he found the strength to continue. "I don't know. It just sucked. I felt gross all the time. But I liked plants and tiny animals and then I found a textbook about life and biology, and it just fascinated me. I used it to get away from my life. And then, eventually, I used my life to get more of it. I figured that if I was already ruined, it wouldn't hurt to ruin myself a little more for something I actually wanted."

Mal flicked her gaze down to the beach, and then turned away. Audrey looked heartbroken and ill beside her. "That's tough," Mal whispered. "I'm sorry."

"It's over," Evan shrugged. "I won't ever let another person take advantage of me. I've been hurt for the last time, and I don't have to let anybody hurt me for anything."

"How can you move past that?" Audrey asked, leaning forward and chewing on her lip a little as she spoke. "It took me ages and a near-death experience for me to forgive Mal for marrying Ben, and these people hurt you in ways you'll never forget or live past. How can you just let that go?"

Evan examined his hands, watching the veins and muscles in them before he shrugged. "They helped me live," He finally decided in a hoarse tone. "And part of it might have been my fault. I let them take me. I paid an expensive price, but I didn't have much to lose in the first place. There's nothing to lose when you're lonely and friendless." Audrey sat back as if she'd been slapped with tears filling her eyes, and Evan swallowed before he changed the subject. "I noticed Evie hasn't been coming around as much. I wanted to ask if everything is okay?"

"She's at college," Mal answered, keeping her eyes downcast and trained on the waves. "Fashion design major, I think."

"Oh." Evan's voice fell. "Can you see when she'll be coming back around?"

"I think for the holidays," Mal answered. "I'll tell her you miss her."
"Thank you, Mal," Evan said. He sat for a minute longer, but the silence was deafening. Slowly, he got up and walked away with his hands stuffed deep into his now-wet pockets. Hades watched the boy walk away, and then leaned over and picked up a lock of Mal's hair.

"The gold is nice," He told her. "Vibrant and flashy, but nice." He got to his feet. "I'm going to go check on that young man. You'd better come back to see me," He warned her.

"Maybe one day I'll have something set up so you can come visit me," Mal offered softly. Hades nodded silently, then turned and strode off. Down the beach, Evan's head was dipped down a little as he kicked the sands.

"He misses her," Audrey murmured.

Mal looked at Audrey. Audrey looked at Mal.

"We need-" Mal started.

"-Wifi." Audrey finished.

The two girls laughed and sat back in the sun a bit. It was nice to be on the same wavelength. Mal let her toes drift to the water's surface, where waves washed over her feet and tickled her skin. The sun was seeping into her skin. She couldn't stay here long, or she'd burn. Beside her, she could feel Audrey drowning in despair over the story she'd just been told. Mal cleared her throat. "You'll find lots of people like that here," She revealed in a voice that made her sound a lot stronger than she felt. "All the kids of the lower villains have been attacked in one way or another. Gaston is one of the worse cases. His kids are all over the Isle, and even some of his own daughters haven't been unscathed by him."

"That's revolting," Audrey shuddered. Mal nodded in silent agreement. "Was that ever you?"

"No," Mal shook her head. "My mom was powerful. Her name protected me. And even if it hadn't have, I had Jay and I was a pretty good swordsperson. I had power. I did wonder if it'd happen to me, though. Even when I went to Auradon." She watched the waves crash over her toes and sighed. "My goal is to stop it from ever happening to anyone ever again. I want people to be safe. I want people to have the same opportunities I was given."

She couldn't see Audrey's face but felt her silent approval. "I like not hating your guts," Audrey said softly.

Mal smirked over at Aurora's daughter. "Believe it or not, me too."

Audrey twiddled her thumbs in front of her new shell. "I'm sorry for all the rumors I spread about you. That was me, by the way."

"I know," Mal nodded, heart twisting a little as she remembered the headlines.

"You aren't mad?" Audrey asked with a raised eyebrow.

Mal chuckled. "You've more than proven yourself. I know it won't happen again." She buried her hand into the beach and came up with a handful of wet silt and glittering shells.

"I'll retract the statements if you want?" Audrey offered.

"And ruin your name? Don't worry about it." Mal retorted, relaxing a little as she felt baggage fall off her shoulders. It was nice to finally let things go.
Silence settled in between the two girls. As Mal watched people run through the water and examined Dizzy and Anastasia carefully snipping away at people's overgrown locks, she smiled at everything she'd built. She had a wonderful relationship with her husband, two new best friends, a mother and father-in-law, her dad, a sister, and two kingdoms that she had healed and built almost all by herself.

Her smile faded suddenly as a sad thought struck her. If only her real mom could be a part of it all.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Maleficent Sr dies and is cremated in the Moorlands. Mal receives prophecies on the upcoming war. Ben commands his war council and his parents make peace with the way he runs Auradon. Mal returns at the end of the month.

Chapter Notes

ON THIS CHAPTER - Mal sings a rendition of 'Evil Like Me' in this chapter. It is shorter than the original. The chords are all the same except for an extra added bar in between where 'you should thank your lucky stars that you were born the girl you are' and 'the daughter of an evilicious queen like me' are. I'm debating on recording myself singing it and putting it up on Tumblr for you all to get an idea of what's going on. I will let you know if that happens(I have a cold so idk) - my tumblr blog is under my username 'WanderlustandFreedom'.

"You think Auradon is mostly okay with me now?" Mal asked through a yawn. The sun was filtering through the window and casting hazy patterns on the carpet. She rolled over to face Ben, who had been busy running his fingers through her hair and curled herself closer to his bare chest. She put her arms around his neck and began running her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck.

"It's far too early to be thinking of that," Ben mumbled. His breath was close to her hairline. He carefully put his arms around her and began to trail his fingertips up her back in cool, comforting strokes.

"Yeah, but what do you think?" Mal asked. She dropped one of her hands and brought it to rest on his sternum. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I hope they like you now," Ben whispered. "There haven't been any protestors for a little while, and you've been working very hard between the Isle and the Moorlands."

"No kidding," Mal groaned. She kissed his jawline and laid her head against his collar. Their bodies felt cool, pressed together with their skin both a little icy. "I want you again."

"It's far too early to be thinking of that," Ben repeated with a smile in his tone. He did reach down and cup a hand at her thigh. His cool touch felt like some sort of healing balm. She closed her eyes as Ben's warm breath tickled her ear. "Besides," he whispered. "We need to get protection before we do this too often more."

It was a fair, if unfortunate point. Mal sighed in acquiescence.

He pulled her even closer to him and their legs became entangled in the cool sheets. She winced as
pain ran up her spine, and then relaxed. Somehow, the covers had fallen off the bed, but he was so warm she hadn't noticed until now. "You okay?" He whispered.

"Yeah." She whispered back. She curled her toes up and poked his foot with them. He chuckled and wrapped her up in a large bear hug. She smiled and closed her eyes as she laid her heavy head on his chest. "Think everyone would notice if we took another hour to get up?" She whispered.

Ben let out a guffaw. "Of course." He laughed. "They're probably already jumping to conclusions. It's eight."

"Eight?" Mal mourned. She sat up to glare at the alarm clock on his side. Sure enough, the blinking numbers read 8:17. She growled and slumped back into Ben's skin. "No, it's not time to get up." She told him. "Three more hours."

"The boat to the Isle leaves at ten," Ben reminded her with a smile.

"No, it doesn't," Mal complained.

"Audrey will be waiting for you." Ben laughed.

"Audrey's a big girl," Mal mumbled. She folded her arms under her head on top of Ben's chest and closed her eyes. "She can find her way to the wharf and back."

Ben laughed. He picked her up off of him, untangling their legs in the process, and laid her back in the covers. Heavy stabs of pain ran through her. Mal whined and pulled the covers up over her head as Ben climbed out of bed. "Come on, your majesty." He chuckled, pulling her out from under her cotton guard. "You have to shower and get dressed still."

"No, I don't," Mal growled. She sat up and glared at him.

"Yes, you do." Ben laughed. He looked around the room and shook his head. He found their pajamas where they had fallen and pushed hers into her hands with a laugh.

"Ugh." Mal sighed as she tried to force her arms through her pajama top. "What if I get dressed in my pajamas and then just don't shower?"

"Then you'll smell like me the entire day and people will give you and I weird looks," Ben told her.

"Sounds normal." Mal shrugged. She pulled on her pajama pants and walked to the door. It was even brighter outside. She squinted through the living room and went to check on her mom. Maleficent was lying on a little rock in the terrarium, shivering under her lamp. A little puddle of lizard blood surrounded her, and more was oozing out of sores on the poor lizard's skin. Mal bit her lip. "On second thought, maybe I should just stay here all day." She sighed, turning back to the bedroom, where Ben was carrying a change of clothes for both him and her in his arms on his way to start the shower. "For real." She added.

Ben frowned. He flipped the light on in the bathroom, set the clothes down, and came to kneel beside her at her mother's terrarium. When he saw the state Maleficent was lying in, he winced. "Oh, god." He whispered.

Mal nodded. "Yeah." She sighed. "I'm going to stay here and do work in my office for the Isle. Do you know where my phone is? I need to text Audrey and let her know I'm staying in."

Ben put his arm around her as they watched Maleficent take ragged breath after ragged breath. Mal sighed and shook her head. She stood up and started walking away. "Are we showering together
"If you can handle it?" Ben replied, remaining sitting as Maleficent opened an eye and examined him like he was something dirty she didn't want to be associated with.

"Sounds good," Mal called. He heard the water start running from the bathroom and the door swung closed but didn't lock.

Ben watched Maleficent's tail flick back and forth. "I'm sorry." He whispered. "I wish there was something we could do to help."

The little lizard flicked her tongue out and hissed at him. Ben snorted. "Yeah, I know you hate me." In response, Maleficent closed her eye and curled up a little on her rock. Ben let out a sigh and got to his feet. "Thank you." He whispered. Maleficent didn't respond. "For everything." He clarified. "Mal and Madison, and the curse." He swallowed. "I love her a lot. I don't know if you can understand that, but I do."

She still didn't respond, so Ben sighed and headed back to the bathroom, pulling his shirt back off as he walked. He sidestepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him, and completely missed Maleficent flick an eye open before she snorted and curled up miserably on her stone.

Mal stilled her breathing as she watched the light shine through the lizard's pearlescent skin. Her mom opened one eye lazily and then closed it again. She took a last breath and stilled.

For several seconds, Mal sat and observed. Her legs started to go numb beneath her. She held her breath to make sure it wasn't a trick of the light, and then carefully turned off the heat lamp and opened the cage. She took the lizard in her hands as tears filled her eyes. Her hands shook. Maleficent's body was already going cold. Mal carefully put her mother back down, knowing her eyes hadn't fooled her, and that Maleficent was now dead.

Everything felt different. She curled her legs up to her chest, leaning back against the couch, and buried her face away from the sunlight streaming in from the windows. She was motherless. The woman who had raised her was gone. Mal searched through her memories to try and re-discover a single happy memory, but none came to mind.

The door to the bedroom opened with a swishing sound. Mal lifted her head and watched Ben appear with a frown on his face and a stack of books in his arms. His eyes immediately fell upon Mal.

"I came up to check on you." He said. "Is everything alright?"

Mal sniffled and shook her head. Ben immediately shut the door behind him and strode towards her, letting the books thud onto a side table and then slide onto the floor as he passed. Mal heard papers hitting the carpet as he reached the couch. When he saw the heat lamp off and the terrarium's lid removed, he knew immediately. His face softened.

"Oh, Mal." He rounded the couch and hit the floor next to her, reaching for her hand. Mal wiped her eyes as tears began to fall.

"I'm okay." She told him, told herself. "It's okay." He squeezed her hand and she turned to fall into his chest. Mal put her arms around his neck and let her head drop in between his neck and shoulder as she sobbed. The tears felt like they were being pulled up her throat and out her eyes as she mourned everything she had lost. Ben kept one comforting arm around her back and another on the back of her head, where he gently rubbed her scalp and waited for her to soften her cries.
"I'm okay." She repeated into his shoulder. "I'm okay; I have you."

Ben chuckled. "I don't have to be enough. You're allowed to depend on more than one person." He hugged her tightly. "Want me to go get mom?" He asked, referring to Belle. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"No." Mal gasped as she wiped her eyes and began to take deep breaths. To be honest, she didn't want to see Belle for a little while, and wished, in a backward sort of way, that Ben hadn't referred to his mom – the person who had shown Mal more matronly love than her own parent – as her mom because that was wrong. She had a mom. Or, rather, had had a mom. Her mom made her who she was. She was her mom's daughter. Not Belle's. Belle was Ben's mother and Maleficent was hers and Mal was Ben's wife and there should be separations. "No, you are enough. Thank you; you're always there when I need you."

Ben kissed the crown of her head as she began to release her hold a little. "Will you be okay?" He asked.

She nodded but didn't pull away from him. Ben knew it would be a while still. He wrapped his arms around her as tightly as he could and rubbed her back while she dealt with all her sorrow.

Maleficent would be cremated at her childhood home of the moors. Mal and Ben announced they'd be traveling to the moorlands. Two days before they left, people in the moorlands called to inform Mal of a decision that had been reached in light of the recent death – the moorpeople, despite still prepared for war and angered with Auradon, would allow Auradon people behind the borders to see the event.

On August the seventeenth, Mal returned to the moorlands. With help of some fae folk, a path was paved, tables and pavilions were magically erected, and the proceedings were arranged. Ben went with her, and they took Madison with them. Belle and Adam would follow separately.

"I knew her as a child," One of the rock trolls reminded Mal in a crumbly voice as she put a bowl filled with fruit down on a table with shaking hands. Ben was sitting down, holding Madison, who was dressed in a little yellow dress with a daisy clip in her hair, up to his face and teasing her, but turned to watch her exhale as she rested her palms on the table. "She couldn't be kept in one place! She flew all over these lands, every day."

"Thank you for telling me," Mal acknowledged the troll. Many of the creatures were attempting to break out the Auradon languages they knew – Ben had been able to hold a conversation with a flying fish that spoke French with a muddied accent, but others wouldn't be able to converse with whoever came from Ben's country.

Mal pushed herself back up as if the initial exertion would keep her going, but Ben caught her arm as she passed and held her in place. "Sit," He whispered. "You're going to wear yourself out."

Mal shook her head. "If I sit, I'll be still, and I… don't want that."

"Rest," Ben commanded. He pulled her down onto the bench beside him and put his hand on top of her hand. "Everyone will be here soon."

Mal shook her head. "Do you really think Auradon will come to remember a villain?"

Ben shrugged. He put his hand in front of Madison's face, and she furrowed her brow up as she tried to reach his fingers. Mal couldn't look right at the little girl. She looked too much like Maleficent. "I didn't think I would… I mean… I never really pictured her dying. Fae usually live
"You seem the kind of person who wouldn't think about death very much," Ben nodded. "I, um, don't know what to say. Maleficent has always been kind of a mystery to me. When you showed up, you insisted you didn't care for her. But it's clear now that that was wrong."

Mal shook her head. "I don't know what changed. Maybe I just wished she would have been a better mom so much I wanted to let her back in so she could try again. And then she died." She clasped her hands together and shook her head. "I wish… I wish so many things."

Ben exhaled a little, and then hooked his fingers under her chin to pull it up. She expected some sort of speech, but he pointed down the pebble path to where the edges of Auroria's fields were visible almost a mile away. "Look," he whispered, and Mal's breath caught a little eat what she saw.

People were coming. People in gowns and in boots and in suits and dresses. Poor people, rich people, royals, and commoners. Some marveled at the trees and the creatures and the scenery as they passed, and others kept their faces straight, observing the event with the grace the event called for. Mal couldn't believe it.

People came into the clearing and fae people came up slowly, cautiously, to bid them hello. Mercy, Myth, and May were among the front bearers of the group. The Fae were the prominent group helping Mal organize things because Maleficent had been one of them. Mal watched one younger fae child wave to another small, human child, and then tried starting a conversation in rocky English. Some people took notice of the King and Queen sat at one of the tables under the pavilion, but Mal turned her head to the ground and people assumed she wanted her space. She knew that, sooner or later, she'd have to interact with some of them.

"My parents are here," Ben narrated softly, setting his hand on her back and rubbing circles on her spine. "Do you want me to-"

"Ben, I love your mom," Mal sighed, pulling down on her skirt a little. She was wearing a short, sleeveless black mourning dress and had chopped her hair back to be chin-length again. It was odd to have her blunt hairline tickling her jaw. Ben, meanwhile, had dressed in a suit despite the heat. "But she's not my mom and I don't want her to try to be right now."

Ben nodded, withdrawing his hand. "Okay," He whispered.

"There you are!" Someone explained, walking up to them. At first, Mal thought it might be Belle, but then she glimpsed for blue high heels and her head snapped up.

"Evie," She whispered, rising to her feet a little. Jay and Carlos were right behind her, dressed in a darker color scheme, and Sophia and Stewart were coming up behind them. Evie wrapped her arms around Mal, squeezing her tightly, and Mal felt problems falling off of her shoulders as she buried her face away in the Isle Girl's arms.

"Is she okay?" Jay whispered to Ben, coming up to shake his hand and wave at his sister while Evie held onto Mal.

"She says she is, but it'll take time," Ben responded in a lowered tone as if he were pretending to hide the fact that they were talking from Mal.

Mal looked at Carlos and her mouth unhinged from her jaw. "Is that a dog?" She asked, blinking in shock at the brown-haired furry creature in Carlos's arms.
Carlos blushed a little and nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. "I, uh, met him when we were touring the campus with Ben. He was a service animal, but he was having a hard time in obedience class, so I asked if I could take him."

If you had told Mal back on the Isle that Carlos would one day go away to college and find a dog… well, she supposed anything about her life now would have startled her old self.

"Are you okay?" Evie asked, holding onto Mal's hands as Mal sat back down beside Ben. Ben was playing with Madison's feet a little, though he didn't do much else to pretend he wasn't listening to every word of their conversation.

"I, uh, sort of feel like I'm going to throw up," Mal admitted. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Hey, we're with you, okay?" Jay asked, bending down to be on eye level with her a little.

"Ben!" Someone called from the crowd. A small group appeared behind Carlos's head. Mal's eyes flicked over the newcomers, and she was displeased to see Chad Charming approaching, looking like he had just encountered a particularly unfavorable creature. Mal counted backward in her head. Her temporary restraining order was supposed to last six months… so Chad still wasn't supposed to be around her. She turned to stare at Ben, whose face had brightened up upon seeing the group.

"Lonnie!" He exclaimed, standing up and securing Madison close to his chest. He gave his old friend and one of the people who'd helped them on the Isle a one-armed hug before immediately moving to the next person in line, who was a dark-haired girl with a wide nose and doe-like eyes that Mal didn't recognize. "Jane! Aziz!" He hugged another dark-skinned Arabic boy who didn't look too different from Jay. Audrey was next, and then Ben went to hug Chad, paused, and his expression crumpled distastefully. "Chad," He deadpanned. "Are you here with family?"

"Yeah, my mom wanted to come and support the crown," Chad nodded, shoving his hands into his pockets and glaring at Mal's shoes.

"You need to stay away," Ben reminded his old friend in a stern tone. "We were forgiving last time. We won't be this time." Chad crossed his arms and huffed. He gave Mal a wide berth, though. He was still technically in violation of the restraining order, but Mal grit her teeth, took a deep breath, and decided to ignore the fact just for a few moments so Ben could socialize with his old friends.

"Jay, Carlos, and Evie," Lonnie smiled at the three villain kids. "It's good to see you again!"

"You too, Lonnie," Jay nodded, looking a little amused at her excitement.

"Jane, Aziz, you weren't on the Isle with us, but this is Carlos De Vil, Jay, son of Jafar, and Evie, daughter of the Evil Queen," Ben introduced, gesturing to each person in turn. "Guys, this is Jane, daughter of Fairy Godmother, and Aziz, son of Aladdin." Ben paused, realizing the connection. He glanced cautiously between his friend and Mal's, but Aziz held out a hand with a little smile and Jay shook it without comment.

"Is your mom here?" Mal asked Jane softly. Jane nodded and turned to raise her hand to summon Fairy Godmother, who had already begun walking to them anyways. She was an odd, quiet, insecure young girl who looked nervously over her shoulder every so often.

"Dude," Aziz declared, shaking his head as he examined Madison with a raised eyebrow. "This is so trippy."

"What?" Ben laughed, holding Madison even closer and kissing the top of her head. "This is Madison."
"Last Christmas you were just married and now you've got a kid." Aziz declared. Mal snapped her head up to signal to Ben she wanted Aziz's point of view corrected as quickly as possible.

"She's not ours," Ben shook his head. "Mal's sister; my sister in law. My mom and dad are raising her." He smiled down at her though, and it was clear to everyone around that he adored the small child. Mal was starting to wonder if maybe he regretted her choice, though he insisted he didn't.

"It looks like it could be yours," Chad grumbled, squinting through narrowed eyes at the almost three-week-old. "You sure it isn’t?"

"Chad, you saw me in April," Mal snapped in such a brutal tone that Jane jumped and Evie and Jay exchanged glances. "If you could teach your two brain cells to count, maybe you'd realize how ridiculous that sounds before you let it out of your mouth."

"You could have been hiding it with magic!" Chad spat, balling his fists up as an ugly vein popped out in his forehead. "Wouldn't be the first thing you've hidden!"

"What have I hidden?" Mal responded, jumping to her feet. "What would be the benefit of hiding anything?"

"Couldn't let Ben know it happened so quickly? Had to keep your frame nice for him?" Chad proposed his equally preposterous ideas. The moment the words passed into Jay's ears, he was snapping into a battle-ready position.

"Wait, what?" He shouted, putting himself between a livid Mal and a foolish future king. Aziz, too, looked blown away by the ideas and he balled his fists as he prepared to fight Chad.

"That's enough!" Ben interrupted, stepping in between the two and holding an arm out to Chad. "We're done here. No more."

But Mal had found her voice, shaking and sputtering in rage as it was. "I live with him," She stressed. "How long do you think I could have possibly hidden something like that? That's preposterous!"

"Mal," Ben stopped her, paused to hand Madison off to Evie, and then kept his hands outstretched between Jay and Chad, who looked like they might leap into a fistfight at any given moment. "Chad, you need to leave. You're not allowed around her, remember?"

A rolling sound came from the tree line and a group of seven stone warriors stepped into the area. The crowd hushed a little as they stepped toward the group under the pavilion, but there were lots of magical creatures around, some which looked threatening and others that didn't, so they were soon ignored. "Queen Mal," One requested her attention. "Is this man bothering you?"

Mal furrowed her brow. She didn't tend to inform her Moorlanders of her proceedings in Auradon but figured this could be a one-time simple explanation. "This man isn't supposed to be coming around me," She informed them. "Please keep him away from me for the evening." She glared at Chad. "If you approach me again here, there is nothing that can stop me from turning you into a toadstool until you leave," She threatened.

Chad scoffed and made to push one of the warriors away with his foot. They came up to his waist, about. The warrior poked him with his spear, which looked like a very long, thick toothpick, and Chad cursed and then turned to walk away. Two followed him, but the other five remained by Mal's side. "Anyone else?" They asked.

Mal shook her head and leaned down to shake their hands. "No, thank you," She whispered.
One of the warriors looked up at Ben and then, turning his head to the side, asked: "Pouvez-vous parler français?"

Ben raised his eyebrows considerably and nodded. "Seulement comme langue," He replied.

Mal shook her head. It was still odd to hear him speak something other than English. "Since when do you speak something that I don't?" She teased.

Ben laughed, taking her arm and looping his through it. "Auradon languages. My granddad spoke it a lot. There's a lot of things I can do that you don't know about." He leaned down and whispered in her ear: "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Mal grumbled, taking Madison from Evie even though Ben immediately held out his hands to take her back.

"Who does that… jerk think he is?" Jay thundered, glaring at Chad's retreating back.

"Chad Charming," Ben wrinkled his nose in response. "He grabbed her at a meet-and-greet last April. We have a restraining order against him. Shame we used to be friends."

"What kind of friends do you have?" Carlos asked, putting his dog on the ground and watching as the stone warriors gathered around him and began to pet his fur awkwardly.

"Good ones now," Lonnie snorted. "Especially since you guys dragged Audrey out of princess world – congrats!"

"Queen Mal," Fairy Godmother called, hurrying through the last of the crowd a little and dipping into a low curtsey that made Mal feel extremely uncomfortable. "How are you, dearie?"

"Well," Mal sighed, slipping out from under Ben's arm and reaching out to shake Fairy Godmother's hand. "Fairy Godmother, I was wondering if you could assist me – my mother is still in lizard form and I'd rather she not be for this."

"Let's go take care of it," The Fairy Godmother nodded in understanding. She pressed a hand to Mal's upper arm and the two women began to walk away, with Mal pausing to wave quickly at the group she was leaving behind as she walked.

Twenty minutes later, Maleficent was back to her human form. Instead of the black robes she'd worn throughout Male's youth, they covered her in a heavy white gown and removed her head covering to reveal her long brown hair. On the edge of a riverbank, underneath the withering, knotted tree where Maleficent had been born, they arranged a burning pyre. Mal displayed her horns and her wings for the first time around the Auradon citizens, much to their unease and amazement.

As the sun went down, crowds wondered at the glittering moors and moving to see the pyre surrounded on one side by the river. People either grabbed moorfood – fairy cakes, nuts, some types of jerky and other meats – from the tables or picked fruits from the trees. Pixies flit back and forth to ensure no greedy person was stealing from their lands. As the lands grew dark, Mal knew it was time to say goodbye to her mother at last.

Mal stood on the bank with the empty pyre in front of her and the rippling waters at her back. Ben and all of Mal's 'extended family' had gathered along the riverbanks, but they seemed to understand that Mal wanted to carry this alone. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate their help, she just wanted to lay the last remains of her old life to rest the hard way before she turned away for the last time.
Many of the visitors were royals. Mal recognized Aurora and Phillip, who had journeyed with Audrey to watch the Evil Dragon be laid to rest. She had to be introduced to Henry and Ella Charming, who were much kinder than their rotten son. Mal could see quite clearly the pain in 'Cinderella's' eyes as she spotted Madison. Mal hadn't seen a woman who cared more for children than Queen Ella, though the glass-slipper heroine only had one.

As the barrier began to glow brighter than the actual sun, everyone grew silent. The crowd parted as six Moorish pallbearers carried Maleficent towards the empty pyre on a polished wooden board. Mal saw Sophia dab her tear-filled eyes out of the corner of her vision as Stewart wrapped his strong arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder. Mal dug through the vast expanse of her mind to find the hardened kid who'd lived with this woman on the Isle of the Lost. She might need her tonight.

They placed Maleficent's body on top of the pyre and people gathered around to look at her. Mal didn't move as people brushed her shoulders and arms in condolences. After about twenty minutes, Adam handed her a torch.

With the sunset fading rapidly behind her, Mal lit the torch. Everyone backed away respectfully. Ben stepped up behind the pyre and put his hands on Maleficent's head. He smoothed her hair back around her horns and glanced at Mal to make sure he still had her permission to speak for her. Mal had no idea what sort of goodbyes he had to say to a villainess who had almost cost him his crown, but she kept quiet as she backed away two or three small steps.

"Lady Maleficent." He announced, immediately capturing the crowd's attention. He stood tall as he spread an arm over her mother's dead body. "Mistress and Embodiment of all Evil. Fairy Witch. Ruler of the Forbidden Mountains, Supreme Leader of the Goblins, Founder and Leader of the Council of Villains. Protector of the Moors. Captive of the Greater Isle of the Lost. She was born and raised here, in the moorland. Upon the age of twenty-four, she rose to be a villainess who closed off the moors and wreaked havoc on the neighboring kingdom, now present-day Auroria." Ben gave a short nod to King Phillip and Queen Aurora. "After being assumed dead with former King Stefan for many years after the discovery of his body, she appeared to lead the villains' side in the War of Villainy. She suffered two of the Unspeakable Punishments of Auradon upon the defeat of Villainy and the unification of the Kingdoms of Auradon. She resided on the Isle of the Lost for thirty years and is succeeded by her two beautiful daughters." Ben paused to smile over his shoulder at Mal. "In my unbiased opinion." He added. The crowd chuckled softly. Mal let out a short laugh. Ben returned his gaze to the gathered and concluded: "May her spirit rest in peace hereafter."

"Amen." Chorused a large portion of the crowd. Mal sniffled and focused her gaze on the pearlescent barrier above everyone's heads.

Ben dropped his arm and twiddled his thumbs together. "On a more personal, non-official remark, I'd like to share something with you all. When I first began to prepare something to say at-" He paused and gestured towards Maleficent. "-My Mother-in-law's funeral, I asked Mal, my lovely, talented, thoughtful wife, what she thought her mom's greatest accomplishments were." Ben paused again and looked at the ground as tears misted his eyes. "And she told me… without hesitation, that her mother's greatest accomplishment was having her sister, Madison, who is also here with us tonight." Ben waved a little to the infant now in Belle's arms. Ben took two paces forward and clasped his hands behind his back. "And while I agree wholeheartedly that Madison is one of the brightest rays of sunshine in the dark abyss of Maleficent's world, the same should be verbally extended to cover her older daughter, Mal. I want you all to know that I have infinite respect to Maleficent for raising my wife."
There was no sound throughout the crowd except for the running of the creek water, the crackling of the torch, and Madison's incoherent gurgling. Ben cleared his throat. "Somehow, on an Isle run rampant with villainy, Maleficent managed to raise Mal, a girl stronger than anyone I know, who was fit for not one throne, but three. A girl with more compassion and grit than I thought possible for one person to possess. I have no idea where she learned the forgiveness that she offers to everyone she comes across, but she definitely came to Auradon with those qualities." Ben laid a hand on Maleficent's shoulder. "So, for that, I thank Maleficent."

Ben turned towards Mal and made a gesture to offer the stage to her. "Mal?" He asked.

Everyone turned their attention to Mal as she squinted the tears out of her eyes. "Smoke." She whispered, only loud enough for her friends to hear. They chuckled sadly. Mal walked over to Ben and they shared a one-armed hug, careful of the burning torch in Mal's hand. Then Ben retreated to his parents and Mal stood alone behind her mother's funeral pyre. With nothing more than a sigh, she bent down and let the flames of her torch begin to lick the wood. Within seconds, the flames had started to spread. Mal let her torch go to burn alongside the rest of the wood. She moved away from the flames as the heat began to burn her legs.

As the fire grew and began to singe Maleficent's body, Mal turned her gaze away and straightened up. This was something she had wanted to do, that she had planned, that Ben was worried about her for. She took a deep breath and began to sing to the crowd with her mother's body beginning to burn beside her.

"Look at you, look at me, I wonder if you could be… happy." She took a deep breath and wiped a stubborn tear out of her eye. "Were you wrong? Were you right? To throw me into the night, Mother! I wish you were here…"

The flames mounted and Maleficent's clothes began to burn. Everyone backed away from the increasing heat. "I wish I had known you before, back when you were a kid." Mal continued her song. "I could use your friendly smile and the advice you'd give. Before you put your heart aside and you lost your head. If you could've seen me now, what would you've said?"

Ben took Madison from Belle and cradled her, carefully shielding her from the intense flames. Belle hovered around his shoulder to fuss over her. Mal choked on her next phrase as more tears suddenly popped to her eyes. "Don't you want to be happy like me? Don't you want to be free? To have someone support you in all your dreams? Now you've spent your whole life doing less than more. Rich in reputation, but in spirit you are poor. Don't you want to be joyful, energetic and content? Don't you want to be faithful and protected until the end?"

Mal raised her voice as high as she could and stretched the limits of her vocal range as she sang with tears flooding her eyes. From the smoke, she told herself. Only from the smoke.

"I don't want to be evil or awful. I just want to be free. I just want to be free. But I thank my lucky stars that I was born the girl I was. You taught me what I needed; how to dream and to believe it. You're a beautiful fairy-licious queen… like me." Mal resisted the urge to cry as she finished her song and went to stand beside Ben. He handed Madison to her, which was the equivalent of fourteen hugs all at once and put his arms around her for added effect. All of her friends quickly fell upon her, guarding her from all corners, no matter where danger or heartbreak spread from.

It would take all night for Maleficent to burn. Upon the morrow, her ashes would be spread into the river waters to run free once more upon the moorland. An era had ended. The first great Queen and Protector of the Moors was gone.

People came and went throughout the evening, and Mal eventually managed to convince Ben she
was fine enough to walk off on her own for a little bit. She went to the river and then headed upstream, west and further away from the Auradon border. When she'd gotten far enough away that she thought she couldn't be seen or heard, she dropped to the ground and let her built-up tears come. She could still see the pyre all that distance away but felt it as if it were still next to her.

The area she'd fallen into actually held some underbrush. Mal checked for fairy homes and then sat down, scrubbing her eyes and hiccupping a little. The soil had silver pieces in it that stuck to her jeans like tiny burrs. She brushed them away and then, pausing to look at the ring on her left hand, realizing through the tiny reflection that something was behind her. She turned slowly and discovered a woman in a green forest dress, stunningly familiar.

"You're Ben's family enchantress, aren't you?" She asked as the woman took a seat beside her.

"I don't belong to them," The enchantress shook her head. "I don't belong to anyone. I'm like you," She spread her palm out on the ground and a stunningly purple flower sprouted in between her middle and ring fingers.

"I belong to Ben," Mal shrugged. "The same way he belongs to me. We're each others. And I belong to Belle and Adam by extension, and to my people because I'm queen."

"Yes, but you chose all those things," the enchantress reminded her, picking the flower and handing it to Mal. Mal took it with her fingertips. The stem felt like fuzzy felt between her fingertips. "For your mother. My condolences."

"Did you know her too?" Mal asked, rolling the flower in her fingers and then bringing it to her nose to smell it. It smelled like sweet honey and sea salt.

"No," the enchantress shook her head. "No, I only knew of her. I saw some of her stories through you, though."

Mal's eye twitched and she involuntarily pursed her lips together. She remembered all too well, in perfect detail, how her last meeting with the enchantress had gone. She remembered her bare feet on the heated floor and the shock of the wedding traditions like ice creeping down her spine and the enchantress squeezing her hand like she was trying to mold it into a new shape. "Yes," She hummed. "Your prophecies. You showed me her scales."

The enchantress shook her head. "No, I showed you the ship. The ship on its side and the city of Perfect."

"Perfect?" Mal asked. "We only call it 'the City' or 'the Isle City'. Is that what it will be called?"

"I do not know the word," The enchantress furrowed her brow. "You English speakers use such strange words… I knew the royal tongues before they faded out." Mal had no clue what 'the royal tongues' could be, and she was a royal. She supposed she should be used to the enchantress throwing her off, though.

"You also showed me other things that still don't make sense. Horses and sands. Remember?" Mal asked, setting the flower down on her leg. "Can you explain them to me?"

"No," The enchantress shook her head. "If I explained them, then they would no longer stand as true." She set her hand down next to Mal's on her leg though, and Mal saw the images again, intense and vivid. The city burning, thick sands swallowing her whole, and cutting grains slicing her skin open. She withdrew her leg and blinked as her vision came back.

"Is this a specific power?" Mal asked. "None of the magical creatures I've spoken to can procure
"Most of us keep silent. We have learned that those without the gift don't understand it well enough," The enchantress explained. She ran her hands through her hair and a beautiful braid appeared all on its own, sweeping her hair up and off her neck. "You can't do it if that's what you're asking. You've grown to be very powerful, but even with the crown blessings, foresight is not your forte."

Something hit Mal like a slap and she leaned back a little, wondering how she'd forgotten. Her dad, examining her as the waves lapped at her feet on the Isle. 'They do far more than just give you the ability to talk fancy.' She set her hand on the Enchantress's shoulder, unintentionally received a cluster of vivid images, all of the people and conversations down in the clearing and blinked them away. "What do the Moorland Blessings incur?" She asked.

The enchantress brushed her hand away as Mal got a vision of Ben putting Madison up to his shoulder and looking around to see if she'd come back yet. She'd have to head back down soon. "There are many," the enchantress began in a tone like a rippling brook. Bouncy and reflective and calming. "You are given the ability to lead, to know the places of the moorlands and the different inhabitants. You receive the ability to interact with the border walls and to speak the languages here, as I know you've discovered extremely helpful. And there are renewal spells that allow you to safely heal the magic here without you gaining magical sickness – you should be a lot more grateful for those enchantments now that you've had experience with the disease."

Mal flinched. The jibe, however small, had stung. The enchantress glanced at her, pausing in her musings, and then continued.

"You are given the power to make decisions for us, the responsibility to watch over us, and then there are other things that, well, no one knows what they do." The enchantress picked at something underneath a nail that looked like it was causing her some pain and huffed irritably at it. "We generally refer to it as an endowment of power, and I think – assume – that it will be different for every leader who received it, but no one will know what it is until you use it. It's usually the ability to perform an incredible feat of some sort, or several."

"Like breaking a barrier from the inside without a focus?" Mal asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Your mother used hers to hide herself and her actions," The enchantress suggested. "She did build that mighty wall, and her blessing might have contributed to that, but she could have done it herself given enough time." She leaned back into the brush and closed her eyes to consider. "I do not believe that the particular act you did was part of your blessing. I think you are just very powerful. You have very wise advisors who let you grow without straining you, and you are more powerful than you realize."

"I know how powerful I am," Mal protested. "I fought against my mother and almost reached the end of my magic-" She stopped talking as the enchantress burst into laughter.

"That wasn't the end of your magic!" She exclaimed, wiping amused tears from her eyes. "More than you've used for sure, but not the end. You were only tired because you went without sleep." She shook her head, sat up on her knees, and held out a hand to hover by Mal's cheek. Mal somehow knew that she'd see in gross detail exactly how far she could get if she were to touch this woman's skin. "The coming months will be hard," The enchantress whispered. "You will reach the end of your magic. You will know what it is like to die of the uncurable thing we call magic sickness. There is a war coming, as I'm sure you know. You will give everything you have and when it is all over, you will know when you have nothing left."
A warm, overbearing feeling settled onto Mal's chest like she was drowning in a hot spring. She leaned away from the enchantress's hand. "Are you saying that I'm about to die?" She gasped. "Because… that can't be right! My Auradon Crown Blessings… they say I have years!"

"Do they?" The enchantress furrowed her brow. "I never heard them say that."

"Well, it says 'your relationship with your husband will one day be your greatest achievement!'" Mal sputtered, trying to find some sense in what she'd just been told.

"And is it not now?" The enchantress asked softly, examining Mal's features as if she wouldn't soon be seeing them. Mal sat down hard. She didn't have a sole kingdom anymore… the Isle had been healed… her mother's woes corrected… grievances in Auradon… seeing those she'd left behind…

"I still have to unite Auradon," She gasped. "I can't die until that's happened." 'Unless,' a nagging voice considered in her head, 'it's a martyr's death that brings about the unification.'

"Yes," the enchantress nodded. "And good luck to you on that as well. Your husband's people are ridiculously close-minded." She rolled her eyes, completely unaffected by Mal having an existential crisis beside her. "You needn't fear running out of magic anytime soon, though. You have a lot – much more than you should, really. Maybe that was your endowment. Increased power. You grow exponentially every time you come here. Or maybe it is – ah! I've figured it out."

She leaned back into the brush again, satisfied.

"What is it?" Mal demanded. She grabbed the Enchantress's forearm. "What is my-" She was cut off by the pictures. Visions of unmoving people with their mouths frozen in horror, screaming in pain they couldn't manifest. Fear alight in darkened eyes and green fire underneath skin and a silent girl begging for something Mal couldn't hear.

The enchantress pushed Mal off of her with a frown. "I wouldn't recommend doing that much more," She reprimanded. "There will be things you will not want to see. Your friend Stewart, for example?" She patted Mal's cheek and a horrible nightmare manifested itself in front of Mal's eyes. Her partner, the person who'd watched over her since she'd been taken from the Isle, was holding his face, crouched over, and there was blood seeping through his hands. "Just remember, one often finds their destiny on the road they take to avoid it. You already know you can fight fate all you want, but you still ended up loving a man you never wanted to marry and burying a mother you'd never thought you'd need."

"Who escapes?" Mal gasped. "My friends – does Ben-"

The enchantress held a finger to her lips – her own lips, which was good because Mal wasn't sure she ever wanted to touch the woman again. "You don't want to know what happens to Ben," She promised.

Ice. Cold. Her joints froze and her skin made littered with raised goosebumps and she stared at the enchantress with growing horror. The enchantress got to her feet. "I know you don't want much else," She hummed. "Which is disappointing, because you listen more than other people listen to me. So let me tell you these last things: the best thing you can do to keep yourself safe? Do not go north. And to keep Ben safe? Do not let him go north. But, come eight weeks, you will give anything to get away. Come eleven weeks, you will give anything to keep Ben alive. Come twelve weeks, he will give anything to die."

"Stop," Mal begged, closing her eyes and clasping her hands and moving onto her knees. "Stop. I can't hear anymore. Stop."
"Just remember that the universe has had a way with you before," the enchantress hummed, examining the young queen before her, "It gives you what you want by giving you something you really don't want."

That was true, Mal considered. She had been betrayed by her mother but had left the Isle. Forced to be married and had received the moors. Her friends for Ben. Peace for her mother's life. But this? Her death for Auradon's unity? That was a price she didn't know if she could pay.

"Agathe," A voice came from down the path. Both women turned, one notably less surprised than the other, to see a blonde-haired man walking up the path with a purple-haired child in his arms. Mal's limbs felt weak as she brushed herself off and got to her feet. Ben, who hadn't seen her on the ground when he'd glimpsed his dad's curse, looked a little worried as he took in her expression. "Mal?" He asked, speeding up on a direct course for her.

Her hands were shaking. She knew her face couldn't be a few shades off of white. Tremors ran through her chest with every breath as she reached out for him – just to know he was there. "Are you alright?" He whispered, cupping her cheek with her hand. And she wanted to cry: 'no, no no,' but couldn't even find her voice.

"I predicted her," The enchantress hummed, smiling at Madison. Mal wanted to grab the baby and run with her and take her far away where she couldn't be touched by the awful visions and prophecies. She understood, now, why Sophia had been afraid of this woman. The power of prophecy was so strong…

"Really?" Ben asked, his tone strained. He was worried for her, she knew, but wasn't dumb enough to incite an enchantress in a magical land with a history against his family. "How long ago?"

"Your wedding night," the enchantress hummed, pressing her lips together. "Strange, though, I thought she had a twin brother. I could have sworn I saw Belle with a baby boy. Maybe something changed and the prophecy fell out of joint."

The sentence lit Mal with some hope. Prophecies could be disjointed. There was still time. She could save Ben, save Stewart, save herself. Her fingers found his beside hers and twisted them together.

"I'm going to go down to the party," The enchantress decided, smiling again at tiny Madison, who had fallen asleep slumped against Ben's chest and was now cradled into his arm. "Maybe we'll see each other again before your time is at hand?"

Mal's legs shook and she almost lost the ability to stand as the enchantress brushed past her and soon vanished out of sight, heading down and following the river. The last visions raced past her eyes – Sophia fiddling with an engagement ring, Jay, Carlos, and Evie at the palace, and Ben packing his things on their bed.

"Are you okay?" Ben whispered urgently in her ear, shaking her a little to bring her back down to earth. Mal stared at him, the enchantress's harsh words reverberating in her head like someone swinging a crowbar against her skull from the inside. 'Come eleven weeks, he will give anything to die.'

"No," She sobbed, burying her face in his chest and grabbing onto his suit and sobbing. As long as he was here, she'd hold onto him. 'Please god,' she begged, 'Don't send him north.'

Behind them, the burning pyre continued, illuminating the night and the people from Auradon. The light did not reach the two rulers on the hill.
In the morning, it was all over. Everything was quiet. Maleficent's pyre had burnt to ground level. A mushroom woman brought Mal a cup of fruit tea which she sipped on as she carefully went over the clearing, healing the areas that had been downtrodden and growing new flowers where the old had been picked. Ben sat underneath the pavilion, waiting for her. Madison had returned to Auradon with her parents and the rest of the country, so his arms were empty as he waited for her to be done. Finally, there was nothing else she could use to delay herself, and so she turned and went back to him. He didn't stand and she didn't sit as they both twisted their hands and waited for the other to say something. Mal spoke first.

"She said that in twelve weeks, you will give anything to die," She began, voice cracking like paper. She turned to couch a little and turned back to see that Ben's face had gone a little white.

"That'll be new," He whispered. "I, uh, can't imagine wanting that." His fingers were shaking a little.

"She said that I would do anything to keep you alive," Mal continued. "And she said that the best way to stay safe was to not go north, but she showed me so many visions of things hurting me in the north… I can't see myself staying in Auradon for the entire war."

"I need you here," Ben shook his head. "I won't be able to cover your countries for you."

"You could if I needed you to," Mal shrugged, though the words felt lame on her tongue.

Ben ran his hands through his hair. "Maybe it's… guilt? Survivor's guilt? Maybe there'll be people from Auradon in Jack's land by then and she's just talking about me dealing with guilt."

Mal sniffled and reached down to take his hands. She observed, again, their rings glinting in the early morning light. It had been so long since she'd been here with him. "I need you," She whispered. "Please, please don't go north."

Ben's eyes were dim as he nodded. "I'll try and stay," He promised. They both knew it was the best he could assure her.

August ended. September first, Mal was leaving Beast Castle again for the moorlands. Meanwhile, representatives and royals from all over the country were arriving, filling the palace to the brim with new faces.

Mal was silent as she packed up her clothes and zipped her suitcase up. Ben was leaning against the doorframe in silence. Usually, he would be in office, but today was the first day of the emergency conference, so he would be entering a meeting around 1:00 instead. She glanced over at him, pushing her hair out of her face, and then sighed. "I guess that's everything. I'll be back in a month." She walked over, brushed a bit of imaginary dust off his shoulders, and sighed. "Try and keep in Auradon, okay?" She leaned up to kiss his cheek and then released him.

Ben grabbed her arms. "You're going to leave me with that?" He asked.

"Well, I-" Mal began, but Ben cut her off with a kiss. She closed her eyes and melted into him, holding his arms for balance as he leaned her back a little. They didn't break apart right away, alternating between stealing more kisses and leaning their foreheads against each other. Mal sighed, wrapping her fingers around his tie. "Maybe I can spare a few more minutes. When do you have to be down?"

"I have to go soon," Ben sighed. "But hey, I'll miss you, okay?"
"I'll miss you too," Mal sighed, setting her hand on his cheek and giving him a heated stare. "I'll call you, okay?"

"It won't be the same," He mourned, pressing his mouth onto hers and then onto her cheek quickly. Then he took her suitcase from off the bed, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and began to lead her out.

The hallways were bustling with people. Ben and Mal had to be careful not to run into people flitting in and out of rooms, servants who were trying to find misplaced baggage, and those who were socializing against the walls.

Queen Elsa and Ericka were walking up the stairs outside when Ben and Mal slipped out. Mal's face lit up. "Hey!" She smiled, and the two queens paused to exchange hugs.

"Are you heading out?" Elsa asked, examining Mal's suitcase and travel outfit.

"Yeah. I'm escaping before meetings get bad," Mal laughed.

"Ah," Elsa hummed, glancing surreptitiously at Ben. "Yes. I can't wait to see why we're being summoned."

Ben furrowed his brow. Surely Elsa already knew? Mal, however, laughed and didn't catch on. "Well, I'm sure you're better informed than most," she decided, patting her friend's shoulder. Then, it was Elsa's turn to look confused as Mal hugged Ericka and then took her suitcase from Ben. She hugged him again and they shared another kiss before she whispered in his ear "I love you," and let him go for the month.

Ben watched her walk down to the car and get in. She drove off, and he was officially on his own. It was harder to let her go this month than last month, he thought. Thirty-one days and his entire life was different.

He blew off the rest of his morning by alternating between pretending to get all his things ready for his meeting and missing his wife and then made his way down to lunch before arriving in the meeting room. This room hadn't been used since the first council of Auradon had gathered after Adam's coronation to set up the laws of Auradon and dictate what was to happen next. It was one of the largest rooms in the palace and could sit almost three-hundred people. It consisted of grand wall sculptings from before the Beast's time that depicted large-scale battles and glorious victories. Ben sat at the head of the table as everyone gathered around the table and took their seats. There were so many rulers that Ben had asked Lumiere for a microphone.

Belle wasn't present in the meeting, but Adam was. He sat to Ben's left, with Audrey right beside him. Chad had sat across from Audrey. There was also Li Shang and Mulan, Merida, whose husband Lachlan was at home looking after her twin sons and their younger sister, and Rapunzel of Corona, who had grey streaks forming in her long, golden hair. Her hair had been mysteriously regrown due to some sort of magic crystal Rapunzel had touched. Rapunzel, however, hadn't been able to use her healing powers since Auradon had united against magic. Ben wondered how much longer until she'd be able to sing and heal again.

He was a bit sad that Mal wasn't able to meet Invisigirl, the eldest daughter of Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible. He had a feeling Mal would have liked her, but oh well.

When the room was full enough, Ben swallowed and drew the room to attention. Everyone quieted as he stood up and planted his hands on the table. He was dressed in his second-best official suit. His best one was the one he'd been coronated and married in, and he had a feeling he wouldn't wear
it again until his kids were coronated. "Thank you for coming, everyone." He began. "We have a lot of developments that will be shocking to you all here, but the Queen and I have been in discussion with our advisors and we have made plans for the future and protection of Auradon."

People exchanged glances. Chad's mouth pinched into a frown at the mention of Mal. His blonde hair fell in his eyes as he scowled and then spoke up. "Is this about the moorlands or the Isle?"

"Neither," Ben shook his head. "This is about Auradon and a new land none of us were aware of until a little less than a month ago. We have learned that Auradon has neighbors in the far north. There's another new continent up there – a land similar to ours. They have their heroes and their villains, and their great war even started around the same time as ours did. The difference is that they were unable to overcome their villains and remain in war with them now." Ben reached forward and folded his tablet screen up to show it down the length of the table. Doug, who was standing beside the door, handed him a cable and within a few seconds, Ben's tablet screen was being displayed on other screens down the length of the table. On the table was a rough map that Jack Frost had brought back from the north. To the far south was a cluster of blackened, jagged rocks labeled 'Nightmare Islands'. Other places were marked "Bergens," "Swamplands," "Syracuse," and "Berk". Brown scribbles demonstrated damaged and pillaged areas, or areas overtaken by villains.

"They've known about us for years and have kept us a secret from their villains, but recently the villains have discovered Auradon, so they've abandoned efforts to keep them from learning about us in favor of throwing the rest of their dwindling resources into keeping them back." Ben declared. "A man by the name of Jack Frost, who is not the man currently imprisoned on the lower portion of Mal's territory, approached me to ask if I would bring Auradon into their war to keep the villains back. After consulting advisors and my wife, we've agreed that it is in Auradon's best interests to join."

The room erupted into protests. The former King Adam looked shocked. He couldn't believe something so large and important had been decided under his nose in his own household. "Ben!" He exclaimed.

"Silence!" Ben called, raising a hand above his head and locking his jaw. People quelled their anxieties and looked towards the young king for answers. "I know we are a peaceful nation. I know many of you remember the war of my parents and abhor bloodshed and violence. And those are the exact reasons we should enter this war. The villains who have already come down have damaged our lands. A sea monster has pulled an entire island into the sea and attacked our navy, inadvertently causing Auradon to attack the magical Moorlands as well. That was one creature. Who knows what an army of nasties could bring us? These people we would be fighting with know their stories and have fought them for upwards of forty years. We would be fools to wait for precious allies to be wiped out and then try and defend our own lands against a villainous superpower. If we want to keep Auradon safe, we need to acknowledge this threat before our own lands and cities are put on the line."

People fell silent, nervously exchanging glances with their neighbors. Some nodded along to Ben's thoughts. Others looked too terrified to answer. Ben's gaze hovered on Audrey, who looked uncertain, and Queen Elsa, who was pretending to examine her nails and ignoring him.

"Jack Frost says they will be wiped out in months with the rate they are falling," Ben informed them all in a low, steady tone. "I wonder how long the villains would wait before they decide they want Auradon too?"

"Who are we up against?" Queen Ella asked. She closed her eyes and brushed her blonde, curly
hair behind her shoulder. Her blue eyes were like gems against her porcelain skin. Ben's skin felt a little icy as he examined her – something about Cinderella always made him feel sad.

"I've been given a lot of names," Ben began, drawing up his notes on his computer. "Two villains, in particular, lead the front lines – Pitch Black and Eris. A Guardian of Fear and a Goddess of Chaos and Discord."

"A Goddess of Chaos?" Ericka repeated. Elsa put a hand on her daughter's shoulder with a quiet shake of the head. The two sat isolated with empty seats on either side of them.

"She has constellation monsters as pets and her sands are imbued with chaos magic. It's an incredible moral killer, not to mention the fact that Pitch Black has the ability to conjure nightmares and fear storms." Ben sighed. "We want to send Auradon resources to protect Upper World citizens and support the hero's battle. This… will include sending Auradon volunteers and conscriptions."

"I don't see the use of sending people to die for a continent we've never known of," Chad declared, standing up and spreading his palms on the table as Ben had earlier. "We have borders around Auradon for a reason. Close them and let the others fight for themselves. A nation of villains can grow quickly but won't stand for long. It'll collapse by itself eventually."

Ben, Audrey, Ericka, and Elsa looked the most immediately alarmed by Chad's words. "We cannot in good character allow innocent people to die to an enemy we can fight!" Elsa declared. "We have the ability to help and to gain valuable partners and outside trade routes. Perhaps there may also be ideas and substances we could find of use in our lands after the fact."

"If we wait for the villain's nation to simply crumble, then those trade routes will still be open to us after the fact," Chad argued. "We do not have to send our citizens to die!"

"It would be a notable suggestion if not for the infallibility of the Auradon Barriers," Ben announced, commanding the room's attention back to him the moment his voice sounded around the room. He gave a stern look to his old friend and made a motion at him to sit down. With a grumble, Chad retook his seat. "Mal and I have discovered a problem as of late with the barriers. They are not informing me when people of that nation pass through, and I believe they didn't inform my father either, as we have had passerby's going through the nation for several years." Ben resisted the urge to glance down the table at Elsa, though he could feel frosty air circulating through the room. He took a deep breath. "She will be examining the borders, but for now it has been assumed that the barrier was created to keep people we already knew of in – not people we didn't know about. Besides, Elsa is correct; we cannot allow a nation of good people to collapse when we can step in."

"Villains cannot run a nation," Chad stressed, pressing the tips of his fingers together as his face became a bit flushed. "Give it two years and their entire system will collapse!"

"What do you know about lands under the law of villainy?" Audrey demanded. Ben examined his old girlfriend as she straightened in her chair with her parents turning to look at their daughter. Her hair had recently been dyed blonde on the Isle, and she had colorful pink and blue streaks running through it. Her preppy princess dresses had been replaced by something more functional that allowed her to run, jump, and move quickly in. It was made of leather, as well. "I have visited former villain lands," Audrey continued, meeting people's eyes as she spoke in defense of Ben's system. "They do not simply collapse. Someone will become a dictator and the population will live under fear. On the Isle of the Lost, people were locked into buildings to prevent escape. I personally ventured underground to rescue people who had been left for dead because Maleficent felt she could not trust them to fight for her. Legions will die and other legions will live for an evil
cause and given that villainy did not simply die out after twenty years of isolation on an island, I
doubt it will be any different on a continent."

"Agreed," Queen Ella nodded. "It's clear we have to step in – for the safety of Auradon."

"This is preposterous!" Chad declared. "You will send hundreds of our own to die for a country
that has never done us anything! Fix the borders – ready our army to defend our lands but don't
send them away!" He looked around, but not very many people seemed to be sharing his opinion.
Even his parents were wrinkling their brows as if they saw several faults with his simplest ideas.
Chad looked around and, seeing no one backing him up, grew even more incensed. "At least send
that fairy queen you're so proud of and have her erect a new border!"

Audrey's entire frame tensed like she was ready to leap at Chad. She dug her nails into her knees as
she glared at him. Ben stared at the ceiling for several long seconds and sighed. Beside him, Adam
bristled. "I find it funny how you take every chance you can to oppose Mal, yet you still expect her
to save you," he growled, voice rumbling like a beast was in his throat.

"Will Mal be joining the fight?" Aurora asked, reaching across Audrey's seat to squeeze Phillip's
hand.

Ben pursed his lips together. "I know she is keeping the Isle out," He began. "They're at too new a
stage of development and many of the citizens are dealing with the intense and jarring trauma that
moving out of a dangerous situation involves. As for the moorlands… we haven't discussed it. I
have made the decision to lead Auradon forward, however. Whether or not the other two follow us
isn't going to affect my decision as High King."

"If I were King, this never would have happened," Chad announced. The change of subject was so
startling that there was the sound of chairs moving as everyone turned to face him. "We could have
had months to prepare for something like this, not weeks. A proper standing army instead of
wasting resources with the Isle of the Lost. Increased outside politics with this nation! It's like I've
always said – it's about globalization. If we'd invested more into science and technology-
"

"Your kingdom has some of the most outdated equipment in the country," Ben interrupted in a flat
tone. "We've increased foreign politics by opening borders with the moorlands and gained the Isle
as an industrial ally. The new continent was unknown to us until this month, and as for
globalization… What, do you think the fact that you've gone through seventeen smartphones
makes you an expert on interconnectivity?"

Honey-Lemon, from San Fransokyo and the Big Hero Six team, snorted and turned to hide the
smile on her face. Chad's face burned bright red with shame. "Well," He grit out, curling his nails
into the table, "I wouldn't have let Maleficent's daughter have any ruling power!"

Ben felt every single pent up emotion he'd been bottling up since April rushing through a single
cortex in his head moments before his hands reacted without him. He stepped away from the table,
seized the back of his chair, and slammed it forward into place, creating a screech so loud that
several people gasped, and that was before he leveled a crimson stare at his old teammate and
friend. "Can you go five minutes around me without insulting her?" He challenged the younger
man boldly. "Perhaps you've forgotten your place, but no one insulted my mother the way you
have devalued and repudiated my wife during her reign, and I will not allow anyone to do so
again!" His voice, which had risen to a shout, echoed off the walls of the room with the appeal of
thunder. Mal might have the godly parent, but Ben was the one who could demand power by voice
alone.

Ella looked like she would prefer if the castle guards came in to escort her away than to spend
another moment sitting beside her son. King Henry, too, wouldn't meet anyone's eyes, clasping his hands together and squeezing his eyes closed. Everyone looked away uncomfortably. Elsa took a deep breath and looked at her daughter, who was examining the grains in the table.

Ben counted to ten, pulled out his chair, and retook his seat. He scrolled through his notes and continued speaking. "There exists a small navy, a number of soldiers that dwindle every day, trained dragons, some magical creatures, and a collection of specialized individuals who are currently fighting them off. I have intentions to send the Auradon standing army, some of our specialized ground troops, and as many supplies as we are able to safely transport over. They have vast transportation means available – Jack Frost, I know, can gain passage from the wind and others can open portals and magical tunnels in the ground. Not to mention the dragons, of course."

"Yet they're still losing?" Invisigirl asked.

Ben sighed. "The villains have grown wise to them, and some of their powers are based on contingencies."

Merida blew a lock of curly hair out of her face. "We'd need to raise an army." She said quickly. "Auradon hasn't fought for thirty years. Li Shang remembered. He shifted in his seat. Mulan took his hand. "No one is ready for the kind of immediate action you need."

"Give us two months at the least to rally people," Invisigirl requested. "I'll even see if I can bring my mom and dad out of retirement. But you can't spring this on the kingdom. After peace for so long, no one will want to go to war."

"We're no' ready."

"People are dying!" Audrey raised her voice suddenly. "We must do something!"

"Well, it's not our fault!" Chad exclaimed. "Why should we focus on other countries? We should work on building up our own. Instead of throwing our cards in with the heroes on that side, why don't we work on fortifying Auradon on our home front?" Ella set a hand on his forearm to try and get him to stop talking.

"We can't do that now; we need immediate action!" Audrey sputtered. "We need to organize ourselves to prepare for war as soon as possible. The sooner things have reached consensus in government planning, the sooner we can begin defending our lands and theirs!"

"We don't owe them anything," Chad asserted. "Our loyalties lie to our country. I stand with Auradon, perhaps you've forgotten what it means to stand up for your own country while you've been shirking responsibilities with the resident clown queen?"

Audrey jumped to her feet and in the same motion pulled out a hot pink pocketknife, which she shoved into Chad's face. His cheeks went whiter than powdered sugar. "How dare you!" She yelled. "I refuse to hear another blasphemous word against the queen! She has made this land better for all of us! We have found a new partner in the Isle, and if you were king, the moors would still be closed!"

"Don't even deny you were mad when the moors first opened!" Chad yelled right back at Audrey. "You were alight on social media for a week! And she's your mother's enemy's daughter! You were almost killed when you went to the Isle to rescue Ben, who the queen stole from you!"

"I was wrong." Audrey hissed. Her knife inched closed to Chad's face. "Mal is my friend, and I would follow her to the ends of the earth. If you had been there Chad… I saw her head almost cut
open! I almost saw her brains scattered on the timbers of the Jolly Roger. I almost saw Ben walk the plank and I witnessed Mal defend us from a shooting gunman. She broke through the barrier with nothing and rescued us all by breaking her sword to cut the ship from the wharf. She can erase hurt and heal wounds and return things to their former glory. We all call ourselves heroes here, but we will never be able to compare to the enchantress who forgave Auradon for a horrible childhood, endured every judging word thrown her way, and still remained the strongest, kindest woman to walk this earth." Audrey's eyes filled with tears. "She's the only person who saw a fighter in me and who forced me to acknowledge her. I would follow Maleficent's daughter to the edges of Auradon, the moors, the Isle and beyond, but I wouldn't trust you with my nails, much less my kingdom."

"Let's just calm down," Ben said carefully. "Audrey, can you put the knife away?"

Audrey sat back down with another glare to Chad and carefully folded the knife back up. Aurora and Phillip looked stunned.

"My wife aside, this is a time for communication." Ben returned the meeting to its task. "And Chad, it's a good thing you stand with Auradon because I stand for Auradon. I call shots. We're going to war. It's a good thing you stand with us – with me." He turned to the rest of the room. "What would you all need to start raising your own specialized battalions from each of your kingdoms? I want at least a thousand people from each kingdom, more if you can spare them."

"Metal," Merida answered.

King Phillip looked down the table to the fiery-headed queen. "In our castle, there is still a lot of metal workers and a large blacksmith area from when Stefan took his plight against Maleficent Sr." He glanced up the table to Ben. "We would be willing to process and build whatever the kingdom requires there."

"With all due respect, sir," Merida spoke up. "Our swords are a wee bit different from yours."

"Auradon is vast." Ben agreed. "Some countries do not fight like others."

Investigator Nick Wilde took off his sunglasses. "Zootopia has forces." He said. "How many, I don't know. I'd have to commune with Mayor Bogo to find out our exact resources."

"I agree with Chad on one item," Ericka said from down the table. Audrey whipped around with a glare, but her icy stare didn't faze the snow princess. "Why don't we just sic Queen Mal at them? She could take them with one hand behind her back."

Audrey cracked a smile and King Adam snorted. Ben squashed his own smirk down. "While I do not doubt my wife's power, I think her magic is a bit too broad to quash every single villain in their land without her burning herself out."

Elsa folded her hands on the table for a few seconds before she raised her right hand for his attention. "I throw my weight in support of joining the war effort as soon as we are able. It simply doesn't make sense to waste perfectly good allies." She announced. Her voice quivered only a little, but Ben would be willing to bet that no one else would know or realize. He knew there was a bit more to it behind her words, but he didn't say anything.

King Henry quickly jumped on the bandwagon before Chad could say anything else. "I also support joining the war." He said. "And I am willing to rouse a war draft as soon as the meeting is adjourned."
"Dad!" Chad exclaimed.

"We as well." Aladdin raised his hand. His Aziz nodded silently beside him, though he fidgeted like he wanted to join the conversation.

"And us!" Rapunzel decided. She and Flynn shared a nod.

Honey-Lemon, in full hero costume, lifted her visor. "Our citizens in San Fransokyo are bright." She said. "Between Phillip's ironworkers and our technology labs, we can begin mass-producing gear to keep our army safe while giving them the amazing capability to fight."

"Will the Big Hero Six team be fighting?" Invisgirl asked.

"Gogo will want to." Honey sighed. "But Hiro is Dean of the college now. We have classes to teach. I don't know what we'll end up doing."

"Consider it," Ben advised.

"What about you?" Chad asked Ben. "And the queen? Will you fight as well?"

"Of course." Ben nodded. "We've already written up a sign-up for an army, and we've already started production on supplies. And while I've already explained the current stance of the Isle and the Moorlands, Mal is still, technically, the Queen of Auradon. I have a feeling she'll find her own unique ways to turn the war in our favor." Chad glowered. Everyone was looking a bit flustered,

"Let's adjourn the meeting for now," Adam suggested. "And give everyone time to communicate back to their kingdoms and discuss their next actions."

Technically, his dad was still trying to call shots for him, but Ben decided to let it slide, just this once. He nodded. "Alright, everyone. You're all dismissed and may leave at your own time."

King Henry planted a hand on his son's shoulder and steered him out of the room. Queen Ella quickly followed. One by one, everyone disappeared out the door. In a matter of minutes, it was only Doug, Ben, and Adam. Ben watched out of the corner of his eye as Adam loosened his ties slowly, taking deep breaths. He had a feeling his dad had stayed behind for a reason that Ben was going to have to shut him down on.

"I thought you said you would continue to seek counsel from your mother and me," Adam began, leaning his head onto his hands.

"I did say that," Ben nodded. "And in this case, I asked you what your experience was in leading the last war. You did not have much. Li Shang and Li Mulan were the generals and forfeited the right to rule to mom on contingency they remained the official generals of Auradon. Mom had strategy experience and the foresight to rule the kingdom. They knew she'd be able to establish a good system. You fought a few battles but were never involved in any higher planning. You have no leadership experience in war times."

"We had no idea you were planning on throwing our country into war," Adam protested. "I can't believe you would make a decision of this gratitude without telling us or even warning us." He looked up, staring forlornly at his son. "Can Auradon even enter a war?"

"Mal isn't the only person with foresight," Ben shrugged. "I was rearranging things during my first month in office. I pushed for a little more military focus and rearranged things so that science and technology labs got a little more funding. Originally, I was anticipating problems on the Isle of the Lost that Mal might need help with. Now, I think that it all worked out quite well to give our army
a little bit more of a punch."

"You're really going to do this?" Adam whispered. "Send people to die?"

Ben shook his head. "No, I'm going to send people to save lives." He folded up his tablet and ran his hands through his hair before he left the room. He, too, had some numbers to run.

"Will they go?" Jack asked, flitting anxiously above the ground in his office as Ben shelved a book of finances back onto a shelf in the back of the room.

"They'll go," Ben nodded, returning to his desk to examine a short response that had been sent up by the local authorities in Auradon City when the draft had been posted. "I am the king. Everyone in the country swears loyalty to the crown."

"Your father didn't seem too pleased," Jack pointed out. He landed on the carpet near the window nervously and glanced down to the grounds, where royals were rushing too and fro, socializing with people who had come up from the city hoping to speak to him. Maybe he would have time in an hour or so, before he had to return to meetings to see what information everyone had been able to gather about their home kingdom's standings.

"He doesn't have to be. I'm not exactly pleased either, but I understand what's at stake. He's just hurt that the country is functioning without him examining every aspect of it." Ben replied. He took a seat and began examining a couple of other papers - other letters, reports about resource spreads, something from someone who didn't understand why Auradon hadn't reclaimed the Isle of the Lost now that it was 'all better'...

A hard knock thudded against the closed door. Ben didn't look up - he looked at his watch. "Why are they trying to bother me right now?" He complained. "I'm scheduled to be in here - I can't afford to take meetings every moment of every day whenever someone had a problem!"

"Ben," Jack whispered, looking a bit cautious. "It's your dad."

Ben looked up and spotted his dad's unmistakable frame crowding the doorway. He sighed, pushed his chair back, and opened the door. Adam moved to take a step inside, but Ben stopped him with a hand. "Sorry, what do you need?" He demanded. Behind Adam, Belle was standing and looking very worried as she passed a book back and forth in her hands. Madison was down in their room, asleep.

"Can we come in?" Adam demanded softly.

"Guys, I'm in office time. I have, like, fifteen things to get through before dinner and before my next meeting with everyone. How long is this going to take?" Ben sighed, running his hands through his hair. Mal, he knew, could have assured them they'd speak later and shut the door, but Ben couldn't find it in him to be so cold to his parents, and the same concept of space didn't exactly exist between him and his parents. With Mal, there were boundaries. Her phone, her office, her time, and herself. With him... not so much.

"Not long," Belle assured him. "And we know you're busy. We're sorry for interrupting you."

Ben sighed and stepped aside. Both his parents entered the office, shivering. Ben shut the door behind them. "It's so cold in here!" Adam declared. "Are you trying to bring on winter early?"

"It's just Jack," Ben replied, nodding his head to the corner where Jack was standing still, examining the newcomers in silence. Belle and Adam shifted their gazes over, and then returned
them to Ben as if they were unsure of what they were searching for. Jack flinched.

"They can't see me, Ben," he called. "It's a belief principle. I think you were only able to see me because your eyes are open to magic, and you believe anything is possible."

Ben stopped, hands hovering on a file as he took in Jack's words. He looked up at his parents, who were still confused, and realized they couldn't hear him either. Belle opened her mouth, probably to start the conversation, but Ben held aloft a hand to stop her. "Jack Frost is a snow spirit who has winter magic," He explained. "He came searching for me about last July, while Mal was gone. He refused to speak with me until she returned because he was afraid, because of you two, that I would be impartial to magic. I think his fears held merit. Your ignorance to magic has closed your eyes to him."

Belle blinked in surprise and then turned to face the corner again. Two more blinks, and then she leaped into the air a little, gasping. "Oh! Have you been there the whole time?"

Ben wasn't surprised that Belle, who had so readily accepted a castle full of enchanted objects and a mysterious floating rose in her youth, had decided to believe in Jack so quickly. He also wasn't surprised when Adam, who had been cursed and spent the last thirty years trying to protect anyone from ever having to share an experience with him, looked at both Belle and Ben like they were crazy. "There's no one there!" He exclaimed.

"No, there is," Belle disagreed, crossing the room to shake Jack's hand. She paused, examining his face. "My, I feel like I've seen you before!" She declared.


"Ericka..." Belle marveled. Her mouth fell open a little as she pondered this revelation. "Yes, that makes sense. Then... you've been coming to Auradon for many years?"

"I have," Jack affirmed. "Elsa and I have known each other for many years. Since she was younger than Ericka, actually. I, uh, I don't age."

"Can someone explain to me what's going on?" Adam demanded, looking from the window to Belle and to Ben frantically.

Ben sighed, shaking his head as he discarded a complaint and began reading the letter underneath it. "I can't force you to believe, dad. Now, I really am busy, so you'd better hurry and tell me what you came up here to tell me. I assume you're upset with the reason I called this emergency council."

"Yes!" Adam snapped to attention. He opened his mouth as if he were about to deliver a thesis and then thought better of it. He turned to Belle, who had turned away from Jack to face Ben with a mournful frown.

"War, Ben?" His mother asked in a tone that sounded a little heartbroken. "Are you sure that is the right answer?"

"Yes," Ben replied immediately. "Jack, please explain while I respond to this." He shook his computer mouse and, keeping focused on the paper, began typing up a letter in response to the person who'd reached out to him.

"Oh," Jack jumped into action. "Mrs. Benson, I do apologize for pulling your country into this, but it really was our last resort. You see..." He continued, but Ben mostly tuned him out. It was odd to
hear "Mrs. Benson" referring to his mom again - even though he'd grown up hearing people call her that. He'd become accustomed to hearing it and thinking of Mal.

As he ended his addressee paragraph, he glanced up to see Jack ending his spiel with: "We're trying to avoid future conflict for Auradon, and we're trying to save what's left of my country." Adam, who had been standing in baffled, confused silence, watched Belle's face grow impassioned and agreeing.

"I see," She announced finally. "That makes perfect sense. It is a good thing that the crown change happened when it did. I'm afraid that you might have had a harder time trying to get ahold of Adam or me."

"Fate has been rather funny as of late," Ben muttered, typing without looking away from the paper he was responding too. "A crown change right before the moorlands would have died out... Mal meeting me before she could decide to court Jay and right when she'd been having thoughts about whether or not she was truly evil... A magical queen takes the throne of Auradon with someone who isn't tainted by the history of it... You get a daughter right after gaining all your free time..." He shook his head and sighed, still spacing paragraphs. "Mom, you'll have to re-explain all of that to dad, though he heard some of it in the meeting today. He just can't open his eyes wide enough.

He sighed and paused in his work to look up and meet his dad's eyes. They had never quite seen eye-to-eye, this he had known. But he'd never realized how much so until Mal had come along. Now, he knew, they led completely different destinies and were related with nothing more than looks, love, and blood. Their ideas and their kingdoms were eons apart. "I guess the curse didn't really end when you and Mom fell in love," He said softly. "I wish I could make you see magic the way I see it, but I understand how that could be hard for you."

Adam's mouth twitched, but he said nothing. A deep sense of hurt welled up in his eyes. He glanced back to the corner where Jack stood and squinted as if he wanted desperately to see what his wife could see. Still, no revelatory light made his composure brighten. He gave up, staring at the carpet and looking like Auradon had already lost the war. "Is... that why you're not asking us for advice anymore?" He whispered. His voice cracked a little, like a teenager's would.

"No," Ben disagreed, leaning back in his chair. "I just... don't really need a lot of help. You raised me right and I know what I'm doing. And what I don't know... I have my wife for. She's got a good head on her shoulders and her two kingdoms. Her advice alone has so far helped unravel everything I was mildly confused on. If I needed the extra help I would come to you, but I haven't needed it so far."

"Not even with taking the country to war?" Adam asked. "You didn't need any advice?"

Ben shook his head, pursing his lips together. "No," He replied. "Jack explained everything to us, I explained all my thoughts to Mal, she explained all hers to me, and I decided we needed to do this. She supported me."

Adam's shoulders fell like a set of deadweights had been dropped onto them. He took a ragged breath and turned his face away, nodding. "Okay," He agreed. "You sound like you've got this under control. And Mal... good on her for making you pick your fights. You've really come into yourself since she came around."

Ben nodded. "Yeah," he agreed.

Belle moved to Adam's side, looped her arm through his, and patted his arm. "It's over," She smiled. "We don't have to rule anymore. We're retired. He's got this."
Adam nodded. "Yeah," He confirmed.

He glanced to the side of the room and studied it, looking for any hint of Jack. Jack came forward and Belle extended her hand to shake his once. Adam saw right through him. He shook his head in defeat. Ben picked up a pen to make a note on a paper, and his parents took it as a dismissal. They headed towards the door, though every step looked excruciating for Adam. Just as they opened the door and stepped out, Ben stood up. "Mom, Dad?" He called. The two turned back, pausing to see what he needed. He folded his hands in front of him and inclined his head. "I love you guys. I can't thank you enough for the way you brought me up."

Especially after knowing Mal's childhood stories. Especially after the Isle.

A smile as soft as a summer breeze blew onto Belle's face and Adam relaxed. "We love you too, son. You've made a fine king."

"Wow," Mal said the day she returned from the moors, on the first of October. Royals still skirted to and fro, hastily saying hellos and goodbyes before they rushed away. The decision had been made, and Auradon was heading to war. "You really got things going."

"Did you not think I could without you?" Ben asked as he led Mal away from where people were carrying various types of maps of Auradon to and fro. His hands, much to Mal's amusement, were dropping a bit low on her frame as she put an arm around his back. He guided her through the entryway, to the stairs.

"Not really." Mal winked to let him know she was joking.

"Har, har." Ben sighed, leaning down and taking a strong whiff of her hair. "I missed you." He whispered

"Did you actually miss me, or did you miss the benefits of having me around?" Mal chuckled. Ben rolled his eyes.

As he leaned forward to kiss Mal's cheek, a voice shouted: "King Ben!"

It was Chad, rushing down the stairs and stopping directly in front of Ben. He ignored Mal, who raised a delicate eyebrow at the prince's attitude. She sighed, putting her hands in her pockets, and pointedly looked away as Ben's expression grew guarded.

"Yes, Chad?" Ben asked.

"I wish to offer my services as a general to the army," Chad said with a gleam in his eye.

Ben stared at the blonde-haired boy. He glanced at Mal, who gave him the impression she would be rolling her eyes if she wasn't trying to keep the peace. She sighed, putting her hands in her pockets, and pointedly looked away as Ben's expression grew guarded.

"Yes, Chad?" Ben asked.

"I wish to offer my services as a general to the army," Chad said with a gleam in his eye.

Ben stared at the blonde-haired boy. He glanced at Mal, who gave him the impression she would be rolling her eyes if she wasn't trying to keep the peace. Ben glanced back at Chad. "You're about to be crowned King, Chad, are you sure?"

"Yes." Chad nodded.

Ben tilted his head to the side and hummed. "I'm not too interested in working with you," He declared, shrugging a little. "Do you honestly expect me to make you a General after two confrontations and all the rude, incessant comments you make in our meetings?"

Chad pinched his lips together and said nothing. Mal wondered if this was a conversation she really wanted to overhear.
Ben shook his head with a baffled smile like he couldn't believe Chad's audacity. "Let me think about it and discuss it with General Shang." He decided. "But I will not allow you to have any sort of leadership position in my war if you can't even command and control your own outbursts. Now, if you'll excuse us, please, Chad, I have to catch Queen Mal up on what's going on around here." He took Mal's arm and led her around Chad in a small circle. The insulant boy kept his head lowered and fists clenched in anger as they passed. Ben had a feeling he wouldn't have any more problems with Chad in meetings.

"Bad month?" Mal asked with a smirk as soon as the blonde was out of earshot.

"Ugh," Ben replied.

"Better you than me," She smiled and kissed his cheek. "I would have barbecued him."

"I shut him down a few times," Ben admitted. He rested his chin on her shoulder for a few seconds and felt her laugh. As she did, the thought occurred to him: October. Six weeks had gone by. He stopped, looking down at Mal. "Come eight weeks, you will do anything to get away," He reminded her. The end of the eighth week would land on the twelfth of October.

Mal waved him aside. "I am just fine," She whispered. "Everything is okay."

Ben examined her. Her skin was aglow, her hair was long again, and she looked relaxed for a woman who had just spent a month discussing war with her country. Which, speaking of, he needed to know how that had ended up going, but she did look relatively relaxed. "Okay," He agreed. "I missed you."

"Missed you too." She told him, leaning into his frame for a few seconds.

"We need to catch up." He told her quietly. Mal didn't miss the double meaning in his words as his hand landed on the small of her back and he began guiding her through the corridors.

"You're acting needy." Mal reprimanded softly as she bit his ear in a teasing manner.

"I need you." Was his only response as his hand dipped a few inches lower.

"Hmm." Mal rolled her eyes and slipped out of his grasp. "Only if you can keep up." She told him before she sprinted away.

"Hey, wait!" Ben laughed as she vanished around the corner. He balled up his fists and ran after her. He'd follow her to the ends of the earth, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Descendants, Beauty and the Beast, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Tangled, Big Hero Six, Zootopia, 101 Dalmanations, Aladdin, Mulan, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Frozen, The Incredibles, Brave, or Dreamworks Rise of the Guardians, Trolls, Shrek or How to Train Your Dragon.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Ben and Mal have a much-needed discussion on the future of Auradon a day before Mal makes an important, life-changing discovery.

Chapter Notes

I do not own Descendants or use of any other characters (Feeling lazy and don't want to count all my references)

"Strawberries?" Ben asked offhandedly as he handed her a large bowl full of them.

"Yes please." She took the bowl and balanced her empty plate on top of it. Ben deadpanned.

"I meant to take a few." He protested. "Not to take the full thing. You're going to get sick."

"If that happens, I'll let you know." Mal rolled her eyes. "But so far, there hasn't even been a small change in my energy levels." She elbowed Ben. "You would know."

"Hush," Ben commanded. "Just because you're obsessed doesn't mean you need to make jokes in public." He tried to take the bowl away from her, but she darted out of his grasp and walked around Rapunzel, who was biting her lip as she tried not to laugh. Lumiere walked past and put a new bowl down in place of the one Mal had stolen. Ben chuckled but smiled. He hurried after Mal as she put her empty plate back and got a glass of water. Pocahontas smiled as Mal walked past with her large bowl of strawberries to go sit next to Audrey. Belle, Adam, and Madison were also there. Ben got there in time to pull her chair out for her before she and Audrey began to chat.

There were so many people in the castle that breakfast had started being served on one large, open buffet table while dozens of smaller eating tables surrounded it. It was interesting for Mal - she'd never had to interact with so many people in such a formal setting before. She'd been a bit concerned about it all, but people were mostly friendly and easy to chat with.

"Long time, no see." Audrey smiled.

"No kidding." Mal smiled as she began to snack on her prized bowl. "Question: is it befitting for the Queen of Auradon to stuff her face with strawberries?"

"Only if she shares," Audrey leaned over and snitched one off the top. "It's better than having gutter grudge on your face. Oh, and hey, I came up with a way to organize your school system based on what I know from Auroria. It's great. You're going to be really pleased."

"When did you have time to do that? I don't even have time to remember who I'm married to," Mal complained. Ben rolled his eyes and, in retaliation, stole a strawberry from her bowl. Mal made a
face and shielded the lid of the bowl with her arms as she glared at them all.

"You can spare a few," Ben rolled his eyes, poking her in the arm. "You're going to eat yourself sick."

"You can go ahead and stop me; I'd like to see you try, actually," Mal sniffed.

"He's not wrong," Audrey laughed. She noticed Chad Charming and Queen Ella approaching over Ben's shoulder. "How were the moors, by the way?" She asked, keeping half-an-eye on them.

"There's some Auradon negativity over there," Mal said with a frown. "But I think having the borders open that one night helped. Lots of people are of the opinion it was unfair of us to lock everyone away on the Isle. Everyone has a high opinion of Ben now, after his little speech." She elbowed Ben playfully.

"Good morning," Ella said. Ben and Mal both twisted to see the Cinderellasburg Queen holding her plate and looking anxious. "Can we sit with you fine folks this morning?"

Ben and Mal's eyes zeroed in on Chad. Mal pursed her lips as she noted that, technically, her restraining order had now expired. Still, neither of them said anything when Belle spoke up. "There are two more seats," Belle said with a smile. "And don't lie to me, Ella. You just want to hold Madison."

Ella flushed with a small smile. "I love kids." She agreed. Chad pulled his mother's chair out for her and sat down between Audrey and Ella. Audrey flicked her eyes over to him with a distasteful frown. Belle carefully handed Madison, now two months old, to Ella. Ella cooed to the small girl and smiled brightly. Then she looked around at everyone at the table. Her eyes settled on Mal. "It's nice to see you again." She told the young queen. "How are you, after your mom's funeral?"

Mal smiled while a small, sharp stab of pain hit her. "Well." She sighed, twirling a strawberry in her hand. "I mean, it wasn't like I talked with her a lot. I feel like I've kind of shut the door on my past a little."

"That's good." Ella nodded. "Forgiveness is always the first step in the best direction." She made a funny face at the little girl in her arms and giggled as Madison lifted her little hands up to try and grab Ella's long, free-flowing hair. Mal watched the careful way Ella balanced her.

"You're good with kids," she commented. She tilted her head in thought. "Can I ask why you only have one?" And, on that note, one as rude as Chad was. Ella herself seemed quite nice.

Ella's joyous expression turned sad. Chad glared at Mal. "It's not nice to pry." He snapped.

"Which is why I asked permission to ask," Mal replied coolly. She didn't bother sparing Chad a glance, which infuriated him even further. Ben and Audrey exchanged a cautious look.

"It's not a problem," Ella responded, waved a dainty hand. "I'm not able to. Complications when I had Chad led to me getting a hysterectomy six months after his birth."

Mal's face dropped. "Oh. That's awful." She whispered. Ella nodded in agreement with tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry," Mal told Ella.

"It's okay," Ella told her, though she wiped her eyes a little. "It was a long time ago. And as I understand it, you can't have children either?"

"Oh no," Audrey and Mal chorused at the same time. They chuckled at their synchronized reflex
"That's a rumor," Audrey explained. "I started it to be spiteful. I'm sorry."

"Oh," Ella said, surprised. Chad pinched his lips and glared at Mal.

"Yeah." Mal shrugged. "Just a rumor."

"So, you can then?" Ella asked. "I'm sorry if I'm prying but I must be honest, I've been curious where the kingdom will go after Ben's reign is over." Beside Mal, Ben shifted uncomfortably, and then an odd expression passed over his face.

"No idea," Mal answered honestly. "I can't say we've tried too hard, given that I'm running the moors and the Isle and Ben has Auradon and now this war." Mal made a revolving gesture with her left hand to visualize how their lives were constantly changing. "And given we've been together a year and we're still considered a special case until I turn eighteen, it hasn't been a huge thing on our minds."

Belle tilted her head to the side, examining Mal. Then, after a long hesitation, she said: "I think the most important thing right now is to keep any accidents from happening." Audrey picked up her drink and took a sip with raised eyebrows directed at Mal, who wrinkled her nose.

"Belle," Mal began in a sarcastic tone. "How could anything ever happen to me while your son is around?" Ben's head lolled on his shoulders as he turned to raise an eyebrow at her. He rolled his eyes when she pretended not to notice him, and a little smirk grew on her face. "Besides, it's not like you wouldn't benefit from any accidents."

Ben made a face and swiped her elbow out from on top of the table. "Mal!" He sighed. "That's my mother. You could just leave it at 'we're not'."

"She's my mom too," Mal replied, replacing her arm and picking up yet another strawberry.

"No, she's mine! You're just borrowing her!" Ben protested.

"For life," Mal added.

Chad grumbled as he picked at his food on the other side of the table. "Or however long it lasts." He growled under his breath.

Belle let out an angry exhale that almost had smoke billowing out of her nostrils. Ben flinched when he heard Audrey's switchblade opening, and quickly held out the hand closest to Mal to her. Mal took it and entwined her fingers with his. "Forever." He whispered.

Mal hummed and added a green stem to a steadily-growing pile. Her bowl was only half-empty. "I got pretty lucky." She thought aloud, looking over at Belle fondly as she enunciated the T's in "pretty".

"Well, they call it getting lucky for a reason." Audrey snorted.

The tips of Ben's ears turned red as Mal burst into laughter. She took her hand back from Ben to high-five Audrey as Ben grimaced painfully. He gradually recovered, rolled his eyes and put an arm around her. He didn't say anything, but he was clearly lost in thought. Mal nudged him with her foot. "You okay?" She asked through the last torrents of her laughter.

"Yeah." Ben nodded, though the pink returned to his cheeks a little. "Just thought of something I
wanted to talk with you about."

"Kingdom related?" Mal asked.

"Sort of. " Ben shrugged. He patted her hand. "Don't worry about it too much."

"Okay. " Mal shrugged. She kicked her shoes off underneath the table. "Anything else happen while I was gone?" She asked.

Ben immediately burst into laughter. "In our meeting, Audrey pulled a knife on Chad. " He pressed a hand to his forehead as he began to laugh.

"A knife? " Mal asked, staring at Audrey and glancing at Chad. "Where did you even get it?" She laughed and leaned over the table to give Audrey a second high-five.

"Bought it. " Audrey shrugged. She pulled it out and showed Mal. To Ben's relief, it was properly folded up again. Chad's expression grew stormy when he saw it.

"Wow. " Mal looked impressed as she ran her fingers over the fluorescent casing. "That's new for you. I approve." She turned to Ben. "Can I get one? Or would Stewart have to take it away?"

Ben held up his hands. "Honey you can do whatever you want. I am not going to call shots on that."

Mal laughed. "I don't know if I really need one though." She thought aloud, then shrugged. "Anyways, what else happened? " She asked Ben, leaning forward and setting her chin on her hands.

Ben smiled softly and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "We have a new spread of resources developing, and the kingdom thinks I should just sic you at the villains on the other continent."

Ben chuckled, kissing the top of her head.

Mal rolled her eyes. "I'm not that powerful, guys." She protested, looking around the table at everyone.

"Yet. " Ben and Audrey muttered at the same time. They met each other's gazes with smiles.

Mal rolled her eyes and peeled the greens off the top of another strawberry. Ben watched her hands move carelessly; a soft smile froze onto his face.

Mal didn't go to the Isle that day. Instead, she called Evie, Jay, and Carlos to see how they were and sat in the library to socialize with the other queens. She and Elsa spent an hour straight catching up. Late that night, as the sun was approaching the horizon, Ben found her standing beside the large window in the library, watching the view outside. The leaves on all the trees had caramelized and began to die when she'd been away. It was almost time for their anniversary. Ben couldn't believe that he'd been married for one year.

Not only had he survived, but he'd also thrived.

"Marry me?" He whispered in Mal's ear from behind. She looked over her shoulder with a strange look before she brightened up.

"Oh, hello." She smirked. "I thought you were someone else and I was really weirded out."

"Who did you think I was?" He asked.
"No one in particular. You just didn't sound like you." Mal shrugged and returned her gaze to the window. Ben put his hands on her shoulders and was pleased when she leaned back into his touch.

"Want to go for a drive?" He asked.

"Why? So you can trap me and do unspeakable things to me?" Mal elbowed him.

"I just want to talk with you," Ben replied with red tones in his cheeks. He was well aware there were other people in the library. Mal rolled her eyes.

"Well, I was hoping you'd see things my way, but okay. Lead the way." She offered him her hand. He took it with a smile and laced his fingers through hers before he led her towards the doors.

Ben stopped halfway there to kiss his mom, who was sitting on the sofa, on the cheek and give her a hug. "Be back soon." He told her.

"Be smart." She told him. "You have a kingdom to think of." She gave him a knowing look that curled his toes before returning to her conversation. Ben couldn't shake the blush out of his cheeks quick enough.

They left the library and began the walk down to the garage. Mal let her other hand trail on the wall alongside her and Ben knew she was feeling for the magic of the castle. He stayed quiet as she hummed and squeezed his hand.

Ben's old car seemed more Mal's car now that she drove it to the moors and back. He was still the safer driver, mostly because she was still rambunctious and a teen.

Ben tried his best to never let himself forget that Mal was still a teen. She was still learning, still growing, and he wanted to be careful not to stifle her. Just because she was mature didn't mean she hadn't thought ahead about what her future was like he had. It was hard for him to backtrack and remind himself to slow down, but he knew he'd have a stronger marriage with her if he did.

Ben opened the car door for Mal. She slipped inside with a smirk and turned the key in the ignition. The seat was already preset to her size and her favorite Auradon preset was playing. Ben got in the passenger seat and buckled his seat belt. Mal backed out of the garage carefully and directed them to the back exit without a problem. Stewart let them out with a bright smile and a wave.

"Where are we going, captain?" Mal asked sarcastically as they hit the pavement.

Ben snorted. "Take a left and let's go straight past that spot I showed you last autumn." He decided. Mal nodded and flickered her blinker on as the intersection came up. Ben fiddled with the volume on the radio.

"You're keeping the moors out of the war, right?" Ben asked as he leaned back and adjusted the firmness of his seat.

"That's what you wanted to talk about?" Mal asked as she guided them around a bend.

Ben sighed. "No, leading up to it. That was just an icebreaker."

Mal hummed. "Yeah, I think I will. I don't think I want to risk any 'accidents' with Auradon soldiers. If the fight comes to Auradon grounds I'll defend your country, but I won't send them to offense quite yet. Not unless something really bad happens."
"Hopefully it doesn't come to that," Ben said.

"Yup." Mal agreed.

They drove past the spot they'd shared their first kiss and began to quickly gain elevation. The scenery changed to something more mountainous, and soon they were looking down a couple of steep cliffs as they drove up. The road hugged the mountainside and the lights of civilization vanished altogether.

Finally, Ben reached for her hand in the glovebox, gave it a quick squeeze, and said: "Next pull-off."

They stopped the car in an off-road pull-over area where people could park their cars in the winter before continuing up the mountain on snow bikes and looked out over the edge. Mal didn't roll down the windows because the mountain was much colder than the castle. The young couple looked down the mountain and saw Beast's Castle gleaming against the blackened sky. Above their heads, stars glittered in the vast expanse of space. Mal moved her seat back, away from the pedals, and let out a sigh. "So." She brushed her hair back, out of her face, and took his hand. "What do you need to ask me?"

Her glittering green eyes met his square-on, and he felt frozen by her evergreen gaze. "Just a bounce-off conversation." He assured her, squeezing her palm against his. "I want to know if you've been thinking at all about what you want in the next few years."

Mal scoffed immediately. "Oh, this conversation? Geesh, Ben, I've been a little busy." She began to crack the joints in her hands one by one. "I've got no plans. What about you?" She redirected her gaze to him and he smiled.

"I've... been a bit hesitant to plan anything without your input." He admitted. "So, I have more of, like, a list."

"A list?" Mal laughed. "Wow. Where do you find the time?"

"It's not a long list!" He protested.

"Let's hear it, then." She smiled.

Ben rolled his eyes. "Well, it's a bit of a process, see? Let me lead you up to this." He spread his hands out. "At some point, down the road, we'll be dead."

"Happy thoughts." Mal interrupted with a strange, unreadable look.

"I know." Ben shrugged. "But it's inevitable. Anyway, hopefully, Auradon will continue after our deaths and that means, at some point, we'll either abdicate our thrones to another couple or have a kid together."

Mal furrowed her brow. Their hands unloosened and Mal pulled hers back. "That's what you wanted to talk about? Why?"

Ben hummed awkwardly. His throat froze up before he managed to spit out: "I want to know if or when you think we should start having kids."

Mal's face went a bit pale in the dark. "Kids? Ben, we've been married a year." She reminded him with the first traces of panic appearing in her eyes.
"Not right now!" He assured her, throwing his arms out to accentuate his point. "This is a bounce-off conversation. And I totally provided an alternative." Ben crossed his arms in defense.

"Do you want kids?" Mal asked. Her left hand began to grapple with something invisible on the steering wheel before she brought it down in a claw-like motion across her stomach. Her face was growing increasingly pale and her eyes more panicked. Ben wondered if maybe it had been a bad idea to be alone for this conversation. In the library, if they'd kept their voices down, it might not have given the impression he was cornering her.

Ben struggled with how to respond for three seconds, and that gave Mal her answer. She fell back against her chair with that same arm crossed over herself protectively, looking more than a little surprised. "Eventually." Ben gasped finally, aware the situation was spiraling out of his grasp. Mal had experienced a panic attack before and he knew this could easily drive her back there, especially so soon after meeting Madison and losing her mom. "Not right now, of course. We're kind of fighting a war and everything."

"Pause." Mal held a hand up to stop him as her eyes skimmed the dash controls, looking for something to focus on.

"No, don't pause me yet!" Ben grumbled, pushing her hand out of his field of vision. "Listen, I know you don't want to because you're underage and-"

"What? It's got nothing to do with the fact I'm not eighteen! Ariel had Melody when she was seventeen and Moana got married when she was sixteen, like me, and had a kid at eighteen. I don't care about my age, Ben." Mal spat back. She looked more than a little frantic. Not angry, just surprised. "I care about my mental health and my bad childhood and-" she burst into frantic laughter. "-my body? Look at me, I'm so ridiculously small! A baby would rip me in two."

"That's ridiculous." Ben deadpanned. "You know it is."

"I just need more time," Mal grumbled through gritted teeth. "We just barely started combating those stupid rumors and now everyone and their mothers are concerned about when you're going to knock me up and-" she burst once more into startled, frantic laughter, and Ben could sense her mounting anxiety like a storm filling the car. "I just need time! I need to not be running around in circles! I need more time - and don't you go running off with that line about how I'm younger than you Ben. You know that-"

"Your age matters to me because I understand we're different!" Ben interrupted fiercely. "I'm older and-"

"So what, you're wiser than I am?" Mal stopped him.

"No!" Ben protested. "It's just that I don't expect you to be thinking about these things!"

"So it's automatically your job to plan ahead the next fifteen years of our lives?" Mal balled her fists up. Her voice was steadily rising to a yell. "And let the record show that I, too, think about children though I'm not trying to plan anything!"

"Mal I'm trying to ask for your opinion!" Ben let his voice rise to a yell to simply be heard over her own anxiety.

Mal sat back in her seat in a motion of anger and unclicked the buckle. Ben thought for a second that she was going to jump out of the car and fly back to the palace, but she just exhaled slowly and pulled her knees up to her chest around the steering wheel. She pulled her gold-highlighted hair to
cover her face and hid herself from him. Ben sighed and laid his head back against the headrest. He closed his eyes and counted backward from ten. When all was silent again in the car, he opened his mouth and finished his spiel.

"I just… want to know what you want our future to look like. I don't mean to pressure you at all. I just… genuinely need your thoughts on this so that I don't make any wrong moves on you." He finished flatly. It felt pretty anticlimactic to him. He pressed two fingers to the bridge between his eyes with a sigh.

Warm fingers brushed past his wrist and took firm hold of his hand. Mal squeezed his palm close to hers. He squeezed back, and they both uncovered their faces and turned towards each other as one unit. Ben unbuckled his seat belt and let it slide past him and into the wall of the car as Mal rubbed her thumb on his hand.

"I'm not angry." She assured him. "Just… stunned." She exhaled. "I do love you though, and I'm willing to work this out with you."

Ben couldn't stop a smile spreading across his face. He took her chin and kissed her cheek, right under her eye, softly. "I love you too." He whispered. Mal chuckled.

"You're right." She admitted with a heavy sigh. "About the kingdom and… everything. I understand… you're just thinking ahead, and we do have three kingdoms that someone will eventually inherit. And I don't really think about these things, you're right, but – it's not because I can't! It's not an age thing like you think. I'm just… busy. My attention is divided between being a good friend and wife and ruler, and I haven't stopped to consider what it'd be like to add 'mother' into that mix. To be honest, I didn't think I would have to for another two or so years." Silence intensified in the wake of her words. Ben rubbed a thumb over her knuckles.

"Then, is that my answer?" Ben asked. "Another two or so years and then we'll talk about it again?"

Mal shook her head. "No. I just – let me get my thoughts together. Tell me what you're thinking."

She let go of his hand and sat back against the seat.

Ben ruffled his hair and unbuttoned the first button down on his shirt. Despite the cold outside, it was getting warmer in the car. "As far as I know, all three kingdoms have to be passed down. I don't know if you're planning on making the Isle a democracy or anything, but so far it seems like a kingdom." Ben took a deep breath when she made no interjection. "So, if we happened to have one kid, then they'd automatically inherit everything. That'd most likely unite moors, Isle, and Auradon."

"Nope." Mal shook her head and waved her hand about her head with wide eyes. "Sorry, I don't think that's in either the Isle's or the moor's best interests."

"I agree." Ben nodded. "If we had two children, we could split it up how we are now, but if we had three then each kid would get one kingdom and I think that's best in the long run. It'll also hopefully prevent the three uniting because intermarriage is frowned upon, of course." Ben resisted the urge to hold his breath as Mal considered his words.

Finally, she crossed her arms and said: "The moors will need a magical leader."

Ben shifted uncomfortably. "Statistically, there's a 50/50 percent chance of magic/no magic between us two." He informed her.

Mal snorted. "Breaking out the math, are we?"
"It's pretty simple math." Ben shrugged. "You plus me." He leaned forward, and it felt like the air was electricity around him.

Mal picked up a strand of her hair, then turned and examined her reflection in the car window. Ben wondered suddenly if she'd ask him not to touch her for the next few weeks until she'd sorted her thoughts out like their lives had been until she'd saved his life on the Isle. "We have a war starting."

"How long do you think it'll last?"

"No way to tell." Ben sighed. "At least, that's what Shang says. I have no battle experience."

Mal muttered something under her breath that sounded like: 'every married man has battle experience.'

"If you want." Ben interrupted, studying the emotions flickered behind her pupils.

"One magical." She continued. "Is that what I'm hearing?"

"I am open to suggestions." Ben reminded her.

"When?" She asked.

"We're still young." Ben shrugged. His words made Mal ball up her fists. "Maybe in like, seven years?"

"Seven years?" Mal asked.

Ben nodded. "Yeah, you'll be twenty-five and I'll be—"

"Thirty." Mal calculated.

"No?" Ben asked.

Mal shrugged. "I dunno. Literally no clue. I don't know when I would be comfortable being a mom, if ever. Pregnancy sounds awful and I'm already busy. Kids are not top on my list right now, Ben."

Ben bit the inside of his cheek. "Okay, so, in theory, if you were to find out tomorrow that you were pregnant—"

"You sure you're not planning anything?" Mal raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not!" Ben insisted. "Just... what would your reaction be?"

Mal bit her lip as she thought. She looked up at the stars like she might be able to find the answer in the constellations. "I guess I'd be okay." She said softly. "I mean, I managed to adapt to Auradon and queendom. I guess I could adapt to that. I can do anything with your support."

Mal looked over at Ben for his confirmation. He smiled and took her chin in his palm again. Her eyes fluttered closed at the touch. He pulled her mouth up to his and began to kiss her. She didn't kiss back, just remained still as he let his tongue tease her teeth. She was almost completely unresponsive. Ben knew he'd really knocked her off-guard. After several minutes, he rested his forehead on hers. "I'm not going to leave." He told her.
"Neither am I." She whispered.

Ben curled a hand around her bicep and turned his head to whisper in her ear. Her warm breath on his lobe sent his mind running in places they really shouldn't have been going; considering the conversation they had just finished. "I need you in my life." He told her. "Don't leave. I don't want to have to find out if I can live without you."

Mal laughed. "You act like I'm going to die before I'm even eighteen." She put her arms around his neck and pulled him into a hug. "I won't leave, but you'd better stay here with me. I'd rather taste death than taste life without you." They were both thinking about that horrible prophecy they had received.

Her words made his heart pause for a scary beat. Ben wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her clean out of the driver's seat and into the passenger seat with him. They leaned the chair back and lay side-by-side as Mal curled up into his side and began to lightly kiss and bite his collarbone as he tried to keep his hands out from under her shirt. 'Don't push her.' He told himself, over and over as his hands sank lower and his breath came in shorter puffs. 'Don't push her.' The stars above them seemed to lean down from the heavens.

He'd sure meant it when he'd thanked Maleficent.

They ended up curled next to each other, fully clothed, watching the lights above them and talking back and forth about everything - their lives, the things that had happened, and carefully avoiding the subject of everything that would happen.

---

Mal sat next to Audrey and waved to the table's inhabitants. "Good morning, everyone," She greeted as she pulled out her usual chair. Ben appeared over her shoulder as she sat down with a plate piled high with strawberries and one lonely grape. He set down a plate with a piece of toast on it and pointed at it firmly.

"You will eat that," He commanded. "Or I will command Lumiere to not put strawberries out tomorrow at all."

"I already have a grape," Mal frowned, though she pulled the plate closer. "I met the requirements."

"No, you avoided them," Ben shook his head. He turned and waved at his parents and Audrey. "Good morning," he greeted.

"Good morning." Belle and Adam smiled at them both.

"Hey Mal," Audrey smiled, turning off her cell phone and leaning towards Mal. "Want to head to the moors today?"

"Yes, actually." Mal smiled. "Oh! And I need to text Carlos and Evie for their help with something real quick."

"What are you doing?" Ben asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Anniversary Prep." Mal elbowed Ben with a smile. "I have a thing-idea."

Ben smirked. "If you're trying to get the jump on me, you've failed." He told her. "I've been planning since July."

Mal scowled but didn't say anything. Audrey snorted, and the two girls rolled their eyes in
synchrony. Audrey finished her plate and stood up. "See you in, what? Thirty minutes?"

"Sure," Mal agreed. "I'll ask Stewart to meet us in the circle."

"Thanks." Audrey and Mal shared a quick fist-bump before Audrey hurried to the door.

Ben pulled out his phone and began scrolling through the castle page as he shook his head.

"What?" Mal asked, looking at the disbelieving look in his eyes.

"If someone had told me you and she would end up BFF's back when you first showed up, I would have actually laughed in their faces." Ben sighed. "Like, laughed so hard I might have spit in their eyes or something."

"You could say that about a lot of things." Mal rolled her eyes.

"You're right." Ben nodded. He held up a hand and began counting. "If someone had told me Maleficent's daughter would heal the entire Isle of the Lost, if you told me her mom would turn into a dragon, if you told me she would save me from a hostage situation, if you told me Maleficent would die, if you told me Maleficent's daughter would break the barrier and put it back up, if you told me Maleficent's daughter would be overly obsessed with snowflakes, if you told me my childhood friend would try to seduce me and then become BFF's with my wife, if you told me the moors would open for a day, I could go on!" Ben threw his hands over his head.

"You've gotta learn to roll with it." Mal shrugged.

"I'm rolling, I'm rolling." Ben sighed, revolving his hands around each other in exasperation.

"Mhm." Mal rolled her eyes. She stood up with her plate and kissed his cheek. "Kay, I'm going to go get ready and leave. See you tonight." She told him.

"Bye," Ben said halfheartedly. He watched as she took her phone from her pocket. As Mal walked away, she took a selfie of her with the bowl of strawberries in hand and the table behind her. Ben made sure to slip the camera a peace sign as Mal took the photo, and then turned back to his breakfast.

Mal left the room and began to upload the photo to the castle website. "Haha, Ben thinks I'll get sick if I eat all the strawberries by myself, but this is the fifth day and I'm still alive!"

Meanwhile, back at the table, Ben uploaded his own statement to the castle page. "Once, long ago, I teased Mal for accidentally calling herself an enchantress when the only spell she'd ever performed was to fix her hair one morning. Just lately I've realized how she goes about fixing everything she can and changing the lives of everyone around her. Even if she didn't have a lick of magic in her body, she'd still be an enchantress to me."

Mal reached her room, opened the door, and began dumping things onto the floor beside the door. Her boots, her phone, a couple of other things... She brushed her teeth and grabbed a ponytail before she paused by the door with a frown. "Where's my jacket?" She whispered aloud with a frown. Last she'd seen it, it had been in the moors with her... had she unpacked her things yet?

Mal ventured into the bedroom and found her suitcase propped up beside her closet door. She used her foot to swing it to the floor and then opened the zipper in one long, steady stroke. It took some digging, but she quickly found the leather article at the bottom of the bag. She held it up triumphantly, folded it over her arm, and reached to zip up the bag when she paused.
Also near the bottom of the bag was a small, unopened package of feminine supplies. An unopened package. Unopened.

Had she bled while she was in the moorlands?

She had completely forgotten. Everything had been so busy. The moorlands were a completely different world and she’d just lost her mom and... she’d forgotten.

Oh no.

She got up and pushed the opened suitcase into her closet with her foot before heading back to the door in a haze. She found her phone on the floor and quickly opened it. Mal's hands shook a little as she found Sophia's contact in her phone. "Are you busy?" She asked. "I need you."

Sophia responded quickly: "I'll come see you. Are you in your room?"

Mal replied in the affirmative and then wandered into the living room, searching anxiously for that sense of normality that had evaporated. She settled onto the couch, pressing her palms into her knees as she attempted to wipe the sweat off of her hands. The air was thick. Her knees felt like knocking together.

The door opened and Sophia appeared, black hair braided back. She shut the door and stepped forward as Mal got to her feet. "Hi," Mal whispered in a stifled tone as she and Sophia exchanged a quick hug. "I need help," She admitted, which wasn't an easy thing.

"Must be bad if you're saying it," Sophia chuckled uneasily. "Is it with the countries? Why not ask Ben?"

"It's not the countries," Mal shook her head. She withdrew and leaned back into the couch, clasping her hands together in between her thighs. "I just realized... I didn't bleed while I was in the Moorlands."

Sophia's expression fell slack. Several seconds of silence were exchanged by the two women and then the black-haired girl took a breath. "And Ben is-"

"Gone," Mal cut in. "He should be in office by now. He's usually pretty aware, but of course, I was gone. I can't have much time until I'm due for a second cycle and he'll pick up on the fact I'm not biting his head off every so often quickly."

"I thought you were-" Sophia began, but Mal cut her off again.

"I know," Mal winced. "Everyone did. We didn't exactly see the need for an announcement."

Sophia sat down on the couch with an exhale. "You're seventeen," She announced blandly. "You told Belle and Adam you weren't ready for kids like two months ago. Remember? You gave them Madison?"

"I know, I know," Mal nodded, covering her face with her hands. "Just… what do I do? Where should I go? Who should I talk to? How does Auradon do these things? Because on the Isle, the strategy was to hide the entire problem or run as far as you could."

Sophia was silent for several seconds before she appeared to begin to think again. "We could get you into a clinic to see a doctor," She began. "We'd have to act fast since all palace expenses pass over Ben's desk and make sure no one sees-"
"I don't like doctors," Mal sighed. "They poke and look at me weird and-" She sighed again.

"Well, they have tests," Sophia offered. "They're not always accurate but if I get a couple, it should be right."

Mal uncovered her face and stared blankly at the carpet. "Okay," She agreed after a long pause had drawn out between them.

"I'll get them from a drugstore and Ben won't look twice at the purchase then," Sophia promised, though Mal knew it probably wouldn't matter much. "It should take me about an hour to run to Auradon City and back. Can you wait, or do you want me to hold onto them for a little while since you have to get to the Isle?"

"I can wait," Mal nodded, sinking further into the couch. Wait and not freak out and keep her composure together. "Thank you, Sophia."

Sophia slipped an arm around her shoulders and pressed her tight into her side. "It'll be okay," She whispered. Mal nodded numbly and exhaled as Sophia stepped away and headed to the door. She leaned back and fell into the cushions with her feet swinging in the air. She stared at the ceiling, ignoring her phone as it buzzed intermediately until she remembered that Audrey would be waiting for her and pulled herself out of her stupor long enough to inform Audrey she was being held up.

The time passed slowly. Mal counted the seconds before she started counting her heartbeat before she heard the doorknob click and looked over to see her black-haired friend reappear. Slung over Sophia's shoulder was a white grocery sack. And, suddenly, upon seeing it, Mal felt worried.

"There's ten of them," Sophia murmured, pulling a box out and showing her. "Take as many as you need to feel comfortable."

Mal took the collection with shaking hands. "Maybe it's just a fluke and I'm late for some other random reason," She suggested.

"Has that happened before?" Sophia asked.

Mal shook her head. "On the Isle, yes," She admitted. "But not since I went to the Moorlands for the first time."

Sophia fixed her with a hard stare. "If you were any other girl, I might agree. But given you literally just got back from the Moorlands and that light in your skin hasn't even had a chance to die down, I doubt there's anything else wrong with you." She set a hand on Mal's shoulder. "It won't hurt to try and see," She mumbled.

That was a lie. It could hurt. It could hurt a lot. It could change everything and at a time like this…

Sophia guided her to the restroom. "There's instructions on the boxes," She whispered and then shut the door for the young queen.

Mal ended up using every one, lining them all up in a little row on her and Ben's counter, face-down. Then, Sophia was allowed back in to put an arm around her shoulders as they both stared at the row. "What are the chances these things are wrong?" Mal mumbled, hoping to get some idea of the leeway she was being offered. Not because she was expecting a certain answer but because she wanted to know if she could trust the response.

"They're pretty accurate," Sophia hummed. "Unless you took an off pill or some sort of vitamin in the last few hours, there shouldn't be any reason to doubt a positive test. As for a false-negative…"
"we just have to see." She ran her hands through Mal's hair. Doubt laced her tone. "They usually say to wait until the day after you miss, but…"

"What if it doesn't work right for fae?" Mal asked, examining the back of each test suspiciously.

"It should," Sophia mumbled. "And either way, it'll become obvious in a month or two."

Mal made a sound of discouragement in the back of her throat and then began flipping tests over without looking at them. Sophia began flipping over tests as well, but from the guttural sound in the back of her throat, she'd glimpsed the results.

If they'd all come out as negative, life would continue on and she'd become a great deal more careful. If not…

Mal leaned back, examined the messy row, and fell expressionless. All but one indicated a positive test. Sophia picked up the one negative and displayed it to Mal needlessly. "I think it's safe to say this one is a false-negative," She whispered. Mal nodded in agreement and Sophia dropped the dud into the trash.

"So," Mal forced her voice to work, though it came out in a bit of a higher pitch. "Went to the Moorlands, missed, but I did bleed a week or so before I left Auradon so…"

"That's tight timing," Sophia exhaled.

"I'd be a month in, right?" Mal asked, looking up and examining Sophia.

"Probably closer to three weeks," Sophia agreed. "You're pretty on top of things to catch it this quickly."

Mal exhaled, turning away from the sight and leaning back against the countertop. Her head was spinning. "Okay, what now?" She asked.

"Now?" Sophia repeated.

"I don't know what I'm doing. How does Auradon usually handle this? What should I do?" Mal turned to Sophia. Her eyes, half-lidded, were full of confusion and worry. "I just… I need someone to tell me which foot to put forward."

Sophia examined the tests while shaking her head. "Did you tell Ben anything while I was in town?" She asked. Mal shook her head no, and Sophia tucked her hands into the pockets of her dress. "Sooner or later, he has to be told. Of course, if we leave these all out, he'll get the hint anyways." She picked up the waste bin and began sweeping them all into it. "I can take this out so he won't notice anything yet. Didn't you say he was pretty observant?"

"He is," Mal affirmed, snatching one test to continue examining it as she thought aloud. "It won't take him long to realize I've missed. And when he asks me about it and realizes I already know, the gig will be up." She closed her eyes and began counting. "October, November, December… that puts me right at the end of July, right? Or the middle?"

"I... think so?" Sophia nodded. "No, it'd be June. Most women start scheduling doctor's appointments but something tells me you're not interested in that social trend." Mal snorted and shook her head, covering her eyes with one hand. "And you're Queen of Auradon, so you'll have to tell the kingdom at some point. Not to mention the Isle and the Moorlands. Eventually there will be a coronation for the new child because they'll have to be named a prince or a princess." Sophia cut herself off with a stutter. "Of course, that won't be for several months. You'll have to talk with Ben."
Ben will… probably have more information from his parents. Ask Ben."

Mal nodded. She slowly removed the hand covering her eyes and exhaled at the test in her other hand. She examined it and then shook her head. "I think I'll just leave this one out and then I don't have to worry about trying to find a way to break it to him. There's not much point in waiting anyways. If I leave it on our bed… he should find it before I get home from the Isle."

Sophia nodded her approval and put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?" She asked.

Mal nodded. "I am. It's just a little… shocking." She pushed herself off the counter and, giving Sophia a last hug, walked out of the bathroom and went to put the test down on Ben's side of the bed, where she knew he'd go after he got out of work. Sophia watched her gather the things she'd set aside for the Isle without a word before they both stopped, facing each other without moving. Neither was quite sure how to take the first step back to normalcy until Mal opened the door, and both girls slipped outside.

She got back late, at 6:40. And, if her memory served her right, Ben had been released from his council meetings at five, so there should have been plenty of time for him to exchange pleasantries, maybe grab a snack or some dinner without her, and then make his way up to their room. Mal checked her cell phone as she walked up the steps to the palace and, yes, he'd been out of meetings for a while. There was nothing else scheduled for the entire evening. And she had no new messages.

There had been plenty of time for him to find the test. Plenty of time for him to take it in, maybe make a small plan or calm down or whatever actions would come with this realization for him, and plenty of time for him to grasp the situation.

She paused outside their door, fingers hovering on the knob. Assuming he'd made his way up here, which he likely had, and given that she had no new messages, the chances were that he was waiting behind this door somewhere for her to get home so that they could talk. Mal wondered if he was adhering to the slightly-still-in-force rule that when she was out of the palace, it was 'her time'. If so, maybe she should take advantage of the situation and let the matter sit a little bit longer.

She didn't though. She forced her stiff fingers to twist around the knob and slid the door open with her foot. Her eyes skimmed the room. Over the couches and the chairs and by the window. They hovered on the open door to the bedroom, expecting him to appear, and then Mal realized that the rooms were all darkened. No one was home.

She set her things on a chair, shut the door, and strode over to their bedroom. On the bed was the test, untouched. He hadn't come home yet. She felt in her pocket for her phone again and then sent a message to him: "Where are you?"

For almost a minute while she turned on the lights and hung her jacket in her closet, there was no response. And then Ben replied: "I'm out – was just in my office waiting for you to get home. I'll be home in a moment."

Home… their room… he hadn't come up yet.

Mal debated the text and settled onto the couch as she debated whether or not to take a walk. He could come by, find himself alone, and probably find the test while she circled around through the abandoned rooms of the palace. Before she could sell her decision to her doubtful heart, the knob twisted and Ben appeared in the doorway. He was smoothing down a blue plaid shirt that looked soft to the touch and his face lit up and softened when he saw her. Immediately, he headed to the
"Hey," he greeted. "How was your day?"

"Busy," Mal smiled. "How was your meeting?"

Ben groaned pitifully. "Chad's making me angry," He admitted with a scowl. Ben released her and went to put his bag beside the bedroom door.

"Have they asked you to go north?" Mal asked, turning to watch as he pulled out his phone and frowned at the percentage.

"No," he replied. "No, not yet." He returned to her, kissed her cheek in a motion that left a spot of warmth on her cheek, and then turned and headed into their room. Mal listened carefully to the sound of him traversing their room. There was the sounds of his shoes scuffing against the carpet and then a ding as he plugged his phone in. He set his phone down on the nightstand with a thud and then the room went abruptly silent. Mal heard the brush of skin against the covers of their bed, but there was no sound indication that he had sat down. She closed her eyes and imagined him standing beside the bed, holding the test in his hand. She'd wondered if she'd hear an intake of breath or something, but all was silent.

After a very long and still few minutes, Mal was trying to prepare herself to get up and walk to the door. Ben probably wanted to be alone, he probably wanted a moment to take it all in. She dug her fingernails into the couch and then heard footsteps returning from the other room and forced herself to relax. She didn't look up as Ben took a seat on a different couch, at a diagonal from her where he was still within easy reach, and set the test down on the table. Seeing it made her nauseous. She shut her eyes and turned her head away from him a little. His cool touch appeared on her jaw.

"Mal," he whispered, and she allowed him to turn her face back towards him, though she didn't open her eyes. His breath materialized against her cheek before he carefully kissed her, threading his fingers up into her hair. Mal kissed back, just for the sake of it. She was waiting with baited breath for his reaction, and was sure this was more for her then it was for him.

She let her eyes open when he leaned away but couldn't look right at his face as she focused on the ground. "What are our plans?" She asked, fiddling with the strings in her pants as she avoided looking anywhere near him and anything near the test on the table.

"I guess we're going to have a baby," Ben sighed. His tone, though cautious, was light. Finally, Mal chanced a glance up at him. A hand was pressed to his forehead and his cheeks were flushed, but he looked exhilarated.

"Are you excited?" She asked, raising her eyebrows at him.

Ben covered his entire face as a smile stretched out against his mouth. "Ugh, torn," He admitted with a laugh. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. We should have been more careful – I should have had more control…"

"More control?" Mal repeated, straightening up. She wasn't sure if he was insinuating that it was all her fault or all his fault, but neither option seemed very gratifying.

"Sorry," Ben apologized. "Oh, gosh, we're going to have a baby. Holy crap." He covered his eyes with his hand and Mal leaned back into the couch, utterly confused. His smile continued burning at his mouth and at her eyes. "Oh, gosh, you're seventeen still. People are going to be furious."
"I'm an adult," Mal protested. "I mean, fine, a young adult, but still. You're only twenty-three! That's still a young age!"

"Eh, it's kind of a common age among the royals, actually." Ben shrugged. "I think Merida was the oldest when she finally had her twins. Thirty-nine or forty, I can't remember. Ariel was the youngest. She was younger than you, actually."

"Then why is there any problem?" Mal demanded, raising a hand into the air. "I'll be eighteen anyways."

"Science says it's better when you're older, so lots of royals have been making efforts not to marry and settle as young. And citizens have always typically married around twenty-seven with children at thirty, so you'll stand out no matter what among them," Ben explained. "And also… I feel awful because you're kind of going to loose lots of freedom and free time. I mean, so will I, but you're younger than I am and-" He cut himself off, shrugging. "You could have had that freedom for a little longer."

Mal watched him clasp his hands together with his elbows on his knees and then lean into his hands, still smiling. She traced the outline of his shoulders and his expression. He might have been feeling bad, but he wasn't really showing it as much as he was smiling. She swallowed. "The Moorlands and the Isle will still need me. So long as I can get there, I'm not really concerned about how much time a baby will take up."

Ben snorted, shaking his head. "You're not ever going to get over that go-wherever-you-want fascination, are you?" He asked. Mal blinked. It had been a long time since he'd mentioned that. A literal year. "We'll have to talk… see how things will work out. I don't want you to have the baby in the moorlands, and as time goes on… I don't want to be separated from you."

"Okay," Mal agreed. "But I still have to get there. Maybe if I could fly from the moorlands and back, I could be there and here more often."

"Fly?" Ben repeated, his smile finally fading a bit. "But… what if you fall?"

"There's a chance of me falling no matter what, Ben," Mal pointed out. "So long as I take care of myself, there shouldn't be any problems."

Ben, however, still looked incredibly tense. "Can we… find a solution that keeps you on the ground?" He asked.

Mal frowned. A pang echoed in her chest. "I like flying," She disagreed. "I like being high. You've always known that." Since day one, she'd been climbing the palace roof and disappearing out from under the royal's noses.

"Just for a few months?" Ben pleaded. He reached out and set a hand on her knee. "Please?"

"What's your solution?" Mal demanded. "How can I be in the Moorlands for the time I'm supposed to be here and then in Auradon for the same without you missing a month every other month?"

Ben fell a little silent. However, his lack of word didn't comfort Mal. It only enraged her. It was pretty clear, from his expression alone, what he was hoping he could get her to agree to do without a fight. "Less time in the moors?" She demanded, picking his hand up off her knee and then turning her frame away from him. "You'd rather me stay here?"

"Just for the last few months – please?" He asked, getting off the couch and crouching down beside her. "It's just so far and a different country… I want to keep you close, Mal."
"They're my responsibility," Mal grit her teeth. "Why don't you come with me to the Moors and give up on Auradon for a month?"

Ben was silent. He couldn't argue with her logic. But his hand still settled on her hip, and then dragged closer to the center of her frame until it was settled underneath her ribcage and on her stomach. "They're mine too, Mal," He whispered. "Is it so bad that I want to have you both close?"

No. No, it wasn't. But he couldn't expect her to drop everything and keep home for close to a year. And even in the last months… that was still four months that she had places to be. Things that needed doing. She turned her head farther away from him. He sighed. "Think about it?" He begged. "You can still go to the Isle… Maybe you can spend the first four months in the moors and the last four here?"

"I can't leave the Isle alone that long," Mal shook her head. She brushed his hand off of her and stood up. It was making her restless – sitting when she felt like she was fighting. "What about you?" She watched as he, too, got to his feet. "If you have to go north, you'll be gone anyways."

Ben winced. "I'll try not to go," He promised. "I swear, I'll do anything to stay. But even then, I wouldn't want you in the Moorlands when you have the baby. I want to find some doctors who can be here with us and-"

"No," Mal declined with a sigh. "No, I won't need them."

"What?" Ben asked in a disbelieving tone. "But what if something goes wrong? We have to have someone there!"

Mal crossed her arms. "You can fight me on this all you want, but I won't see a doctor."

Ben stared at her like she was crazy, but Mal held firm. Doctors with tools who would cut you open and stick things in you and who gave you things to put into your body without ever really knowing about them were not really up her alley. And sure, things were different in Auradon, but part of Mal had never left the Isle, and that part knew with a paranoia stronger than reason exactly what a doctor would bring her.

Ben visibly decided to argue with her later – he was already on a roll with asking her to stick to the ground and not go to the moors – and instead put his hands in his pockets to ask: "Who already knows?"

Mal kept her arms crossed, covering her chest as she swallowed. "Sophia," She admitted. "She went down to town to grab me the tests."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Have you not told your friends?" He asked.

Mal frowned. "Should I have?" She asked.

Ben shrugged. "I just assumed you would have," He said. "but you don't necessarily have to." Mal considered it, staring at him, and then nodded.

"I think I will," She decided, reaching for her phone where it had fallen on the couch.

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Right now?" He asked.

"Why not?" Mal asked, pausing as she unlocked it. "Would you rather wait?"

Ben shrugged. "It's up to you," He declared. "Most people wait a few months to make sure there's
no miscarriage or anything."

Mal nodded along to his words even though the Auradon customs were unfamiliar to her. On the Isle, it was immediately after realizing it or never speaking a word, and if you lost it then, chances were, you thanked God. She had a feeling that wasn't quite the reaction Auradon would have.

It was strange, she realized, to keep comparing Auradon's customs with the Isle's customs now that the Isle was a completely different place where she didn't even live anymore. What was she to know about it?

"I want to talk to them," Mal mumbled. "I guess... I love you, but they know more of what I'm thinking right now." Ben was Auradon. Ben didn't know the Isle. Ben didn't know what she was thinking.

Ben hesitated, looking like he might protest that she could explain herself, and then nodded. He made a gesture to go ahead and picked the test back off the table, presumably to go and throw it away with the rest now that it had served its purpose. Mal watched him disappear and then dialed Evie's number. The phone rang three times, and Evie answered. "Hello?" She asked.

"Hey, it's Mal. Can you hear me?" Mal sat down, staring at the television screen blankly as she heard Evie gasp. There was the distinct sound of a sewing machine being turned off.

"Oh, Mal!" Evie exclaimed. "Hey, guys! Mal is calling!"

Mal couldn't help a bright smile as Evie switched the phone to the loudspeaker and the sound of the boys' loud whoops came through on her end. "Hi, guys!" She smiled. "How are you all?"

"We're good," Evie exclaimed. Mal could hear her best friend's smile. "We have so much to tell you!"

"I have lots to tell you too, Evie," Mal replied. "What's going on?"

"Oh, so much!" Evie cheered. "I got an internship for fashion design and Carlos has a job as an IT guy. Doug has been training him. Oh! And Doug and I are going on a date next Tuesday. And Jay has his first tourney game next week!"

"It's going to be on TV!" Jay exclaimed in excitement. "On Auradon College News Network! We've had practice all week long, and I have a best friend named Herkie, the son of Hercules, who's on offense with me."

"That's awesome, Jay!" Mal exclaimed. "What time? What day?"

"Saturday, six o'clock," Jay said proudly. Mal brought her phone down from her ear and looked at the palace calendar, full of meeting notifications.

"Saturday... six... okay, I'll be there," Mal declared. "Maybe I can convince Ben to leave the palace to come with me."

"I designed a dress for you," Evie announced. "It's purple with blue. Can I give it to you on Saturday?"

"Absolutely," Mal agreed. Ben came back out of the bathroom, glanced at her, and then went into their bedroom without giving any indication he was trying to listen in on her phone call. "I've missed wearing the things you make."
"I missed making things for you," Evie replied. "Anyway, how are things at the palace? Any particular reason for calling?"

"Actually… yeah." Mal drummed her fingers on the couch and tilted her legs up. "I have something to tell you guys."

"What?" Evie asked, sounding a bit apprehensive.

"Is it about Ben?" Carlos asked.

"Do we need to kick his rear for you?" Jay asked. There was a sound like the smacking of a fist against a palm.

"No!" Mal let out a dry laugh. "I'm… pregnant." There was immediate silence on the other end. She waited a moment, trying to imagine their expressions, and then asked: "Hello?"

"Pregnant?" Jay repeated. "With, like, a baby?"

Mal rolled her eyes. "No, with a boot." She said sarcastically. "Yes, a baby! I'm probably due in July. I literally found out today." She traced a little pattern on her leg as she waited for their reactions.

"But you're still only seventeen." Carlos pointed out. "Isn't that illegal?"

"Since I turn eighteen before I have the baby, it's okay," Mal explained. "I already checked."

"Does Ben know?" Evie asked.

"Yeah, I just told him," Mal nodded even though her blue-haired friend couldn't see. "He, uh, he took it well. I think he's still processing his full reaction though."

"How far along are you?" Evie asked.

"Not far at all," Mal admitted. "I missed my cycle in the moorlands and asked Sophia to run out to get me some tests today. We did ten – all but one were positive. We're pretty sure."

"How many people have you told?" Evie asked.

"You guys," Mal sighed. "Ben, Sophia. That's it. I haven't even told Belle or Adam or my dad." She paused. How would Hades react? It wouldn't be his first grandkid, given all her siblings that she's had spread out over the last few centuries, but it would be the first grandkid by the child he'd lost due to a magical plot. Would he be angry at her? Would he be angry at Ben?

"You have the moorlands and the Isle," Evie pointed out. "What are you going to do?"

Mal closed her eyes. "We're… talking about it. I just… am feeling a little overwhelmed and I wanted to talk to you guys about it." However, now that she was thinking about it, she didn't really know how her friends were supposed to help her. They didn't know anything about the war. They didn't know anything about ruling countries.

"Are you okay?" Carlos asked. Mal paused, staring at the line of the table against the carpet as her mind slowed down to understand what he was saying.

"I think so," She nodded. "But I think I'm just having a hard time separating the old Isle of the Lost from, well, my life now."
"If you need any help, we're here," Evie promised. She let out a sudden gasp. "I have the perfect idea for clothes for you! You're going to be the most stylish lady to ever get pregnant!"

Mal let out a disbelieving laugh. "Keep it me, okay Evie?" She paused. Jay had been silent for a little bit. She cleared her throat. "Hey, Jay? She asked. "Are you okay?"

"Um, yeah," Jay said in a scratchy tone. There was a sniffle on the other end and Mal's heart dropped into her stomach.

"Oh my gosh," She gasped. "Are you crying?"

"No," Jay insisted stubbornly. "I'm okay. I've made my peace with Ben and I'm happy you're happy and I'm okay with the idea you're going to have a little Madison of your own and everything's-" Jay broke off into pure, unabashed sobs. Mal covered her mouth with her hand in shock.

"Oh, come on big guy," Carlos muttered through the phone.

"She's going to have a tiny baby too!" Jay whisper-cried. "Just imagine how small her baby will be! Mal's already short!"

"Hey!" Mal snapped playfully. She wrapped an arm around her waist as his words reverberated in her skull. She continued, softer: "It's going to be okay."

Jay took several deep breaths while Evie and Carlos comforted him. "I'm okay, I'm okay." He repeated over and over.

"Um," Evie said, picking up the phone. "We have a thing starting here pretty quick and Jay needs a quick pick-me-up so I'm going to let you go, okay?"


"Bye Mal!" Carlos called back. Jay cried harder.

The call ended. Mal set her phone down and slumped into the couch. She heard footsteps from the other room before Ben's hands landed on her shoulders and he began to massage into them. "You're stressed," He whispered.

"I have a right to be," Mal responded wearily. She folded her hands on top of her belly.

"Everything okay with them?" He asked. "Jay mad?"

"No, he's more… devastated." Mal shrugged. "He started crying - like full-out sobs. And he started talking about how small the baby was going to be – you know - since I'm short." She gestured to her frame half-heartedly.

Ben snorted. "Well, could have gone worse." He chuckled. "Did it help?"

Mal closed her eyes. "I don't know," She confessed. "I don't really know what help I need right now."

Ben let go of her shoulders and walked around the couch to sit next to her. He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her next to him. Mal chuckled and moved her legs to be on top of his as she curled into him a little bit. He kissed her forehead as she looped her arm around him.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"I don't think anything is. It's probably just shock," Mal explained with her mouth against his shirt.
"I mean, I'm worried, I'm excited, I'm not quite sure how I feel about having a kid, but I'm just trying to... put one foot in front of the other."

Ben smiled. He put his other arm around her and rested his hand on her side. Mal laid her head on his shoulder. "I'm excited." He admitted. "Do you think you'll be okay?"

Mal hummed. "You jinxed me." She told him. "Your whole 'if you found out tomorrow' speech did me in." Ben laughed. Mal smirked. "I'm okay. I haven't started thinking about what I'll actually be like when I have a smaller human around, but right now I'm okay. Not angry, not upset, just... content in my existence."

Ben nodded, exhaling a little. "You keep me posted, okay?" He demanded. "I know we have three countries between us, but I'm not going to stop trying to be here for you."

"I will," Mal assured him, reaching for his left hand and twisting his ring around his finger. "We're a pair, aren't we?"

She had no idea how different everything was about to become.

---

I know y'all are going to be incensed. Just take a moment to calm down and think about how nervous I was to release this. Remember, every plot point plays into the bigger story. I'm not just doing this for the heck of it.

Chapter End Notes

Brieva - I know you're mad. I'm sorry.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Mal begins to wonder what is wrong with her. Ben is summoned north and leaves.

Chapter Notes

The Fanfiction.net version of this story accidentally had the wrong chapter uploaded last week. Some people got spoilers. Ugh.

The first headline across her phone read: "AURADON AT WAR." Then, in quick succession, new headlines appeared. "Undiscovered Northern Continent Engaged in Civil War", "Auradon Barrier Allows Unknown Monsters Through", and finally, "King Benjamin Declares War Against Overland Villains".

Mal hummed as she sipped on a strawberry smoothie and read through the official palace announcement, dictating in detail about the new continent, the lost island and the attack on the moorlands, and how Auradon had been approached. Reason for entering the war and a lengthy description of the battle as it currently stood. For the first time in several months, Ben's page was more popular than hers. That was funny, to think that she was more popular than the actual ruler of the country.

"Looks like everything is changing," Adam grumbled as he squinted at his phone. Mal nodded. She and her father-in-law were the only people in the room. She didn't know where Belle was, or Ben for that matter. They were probably fine.

"Have anything today?" Adam asked. "You might not want to try to go to the Isle. The press might watch for you at the docks."

"No, I was going to stay in anyways," Mal replied. "I actually should be getting up to my office soon." She pushed her chair out and, still examining the articles, reached out blindly for her glass. "I'll see you around," She bid Adam farewell before turning and leaving.

As she passed by the library, she heard a tiny cry and paused to peer inside. The room was warm – much warmer than it had been outside lately – and mostly empty except for the figure in yellow who was sitting on one of the couches, reading. She slipped past the doorframe and walked over without a word.

Mal draped her frame across the back of the couch and looked down at Belle, whose eyes flicked up to peer at her daughter-in-law. She reached for a bookmark, marked the page, and then closed the book before swinging her feet off the couch and gesturing to the now vacant seat. "What's up?" She asked.

"Not much," Mal shrugged even though that wasn't true. "Where's Madison?"
Belle pointed to the ground on the other side of the couch, where a baby's blanket was spread on the ground and little Madison on her tummy, examining the world around her and struggling to keep her head up. "Ah," Mal nodded. She took a seat beside for a moment before Belle reached down and picked up Madison. She offered the girl to her sister and Mal received her with a little smile.

Madison was light in her hands. Would her baby end up being this small? Maybe they'd even have her matching hair.

"Was there something you were coming up to see me for?" Belle asked, smiling at her two daughters fondly.

Mal swallowed. She suddenly felt uneasy. Holding Madison was reminding her of everything that was coming and everything she was about to go through. She tried to swallow her doubts down. "I was heading to my office," she explained. "But now that you mention it, I do have something I was to ask you." Belle inclined her head and Mal began tracing the outside of Madison's ear as she tried to gather her thoughts. "What was it like for you? Getting Ben?" She asked.

Belle's eyes brightened. She reached for Madison. Mal let her go without much of a fight. After all, Madison was Belle's daughter now. "It was wonderful," Belle smiled. "Having the doctors put him in my arms was one of the best feelings ever." She sighed like schoolgirls did, talking about princes on horses and knights in armor.

Mal chuckled a little. It was different for her, she knew, but she still felt like she could relate a little. Having Ben in her arms was an exhilarating feeling.

Belle kissed the top of Madison's head and laid her against her shoulder before continuing. "It's fun to watch you and he be in love together, but I do miss when he was small enough that I could pick him up and swing him around. He gave the best cuddles."

"He still does," Mal claimed. She picked at a thread in the couch as Belle rolled her eyes.

"That's different," Her mother-in-law disagreed. She ran her fingertips up and down Madison's back. "Did that answer your question?"

Mal tilted her head to the side. Maybe she would agree with Belle, at the end of this ordeal. However, she still didn't know how to gauge the turmoil of emotions that was erupting under her skin. "What about... when you found out you were going to be a mom?" She suggested.

Maybe she expected Belle's confidence to shake a little, as hers was, or for her to look a bit forlorn as she looked back at an unsure time, but Belle's smile grew exponentially. "That was a wonderful day," She remembered. "I felt like I had it all. My loving husband, the power to change things I disagreed with, a home, strength, all the adventure I could ever dream of, and then I found out I was going to get a mini-me, on top of everything."

"Well, a mini-Adam," Mal corrected. "He acts like you but he looks like Adam."

"He has my eyes!" Belle protested, waving a hand at Mal who laughed at Belle's stubborn committal. "I didn't know what he would look like though. I didn't know he'd be a boy. I was just happy I would have my own little baby. And I was happy, of course, to find out that I was going to have a son. I knew that would mean he would grow up and I'd have a daughter-in-law. And then, if I got really lucky, a granddaughter."

A lot of pressure suddenly fell onto Mal's shoulders. Where had all this weight come from? She
paused, and then fished around for a joke to lighten the atmosphere. "Unless he grew up gay," She offered.

It was immediately clear that Mal had hit a sensitive subject. It was odd since they'd never really discussed it in the royal family. "Actually..." Belle winced, closing her eyes. "And... this isn't something we talk about a lot, but Ben is required to have children. It wouldn't be a problem, per se, if he favored men, but a bloodline of some sort is required. Even if he wasn't attracted to women, there would have to be some young lady to stand in as a mom. In short, I either get a daughter-in-law, or I get a son-in-law and the pleasure of knowing another birth mom."

"And you would be okay with that?" Mal asked. She wanted to make sure since Belle had winced rather hard.

"I would discourage it, of course, since visitation is a bear to deal with and not to mention the hurt that could arise in such a situation," Belle sighed, rubbing her fingertips on her temple a little. "Not to mention the politics of the crown and the danger that could arise if someone tried to use that connection to usurp his rule. And such a girl would have her whole life overshadowed in the aftermath of the decision – people would forever talk about her as 'the mother of the crown heir'. You didn't hear much of it, but there was a very intense backlash to Ben and Audrey's break-up. People looked at her and asked: "What did you do wrong?". It's part of the reason you didn't have much of a public image those first months – We wanted to spare you from that talk as much as possible."

"Ah," Mal swallowed uneasily. "That would have been awkward with the curse. You know, if Ben was gay."

Belle burst into laughter. "Yes, I can only imagine," She agreed. "But, as far as my reaction would have been if he'd wanted to marry a guy, I would have warned him about politics, reminded him of responsibility, and then loved both of my sons."

"In that order?" Mal raised an eyebrow.

"No," Belle refuted. "Love always comes first. From the first day I knew he was there, I wanted his happiness above all else. I loved him before anyone else knew and before anyone knew what he would do."

Mal's face fell slack. That didn't sound like her. It almost sounded... the opposite. "So, when you found out, you were excited about everything?"

"And wondering if he would be gay," Belle affirmed with a straight face. Mal furrowed her brow, and Belle burst into laughter, which assured Mal that she had been joking.

The door from the hall opened a bit further and both women looked over to watch the man in question step in with a confused expression. "What about me being gay?" He asked. Belle began to laugh harder, leaving Mal to explain things to him.

"We were talking about when she found out she was pregnant with you," She informed Ben as he looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Yes," Belle chuckled. "We're discussing your inevitable destiny of fatherhood."

Ben's face lit up and he laughed along with them as he set his hands down on Mal's shoulders. "Inevitable or imminent?" He asked, kissing her cheek and then massaging into her deltoids. Her shoulders were now heavy with a literal and an invisible weight.
"Well," Mal corrected, trying to not sound strained, "We started talking about how you have to sire a bloodline and how awkward the curse could have been if you hadn't been into girls."

A childish laugh escaped Ben's throat. "That could have been quite the coming-out-of-the-closet moment," He chuckled. He rubbed his hands up and down her arms. Mal furrowed her brow. She knew the reason he was being so affectionate and she wasn't sure she liked it all of the sudden.

Mal reached up and brushed Ben's hands, and he stilled them though they settled back onto her shoulders. "How old were you?" She asked Belle, trying to change the subject and continue her self-examination.

"How old was I?" Belle repeated with a blank expression.

"When you had Ben," Mal clarified, moving her hands a little as she spoke. Ben hummed in amusement, causing her to look up at him as he smiled.

"Older than you," He assured her. "Mom was eighteen when she met my dad. I was born right before she turned twenty-eight, so they knew each other ten years and she would be almost eleven older than you are now." He let go of her and then sat on the end of the couch arm. "But we'll make it work," He promised her.

"You've got time," Belle agreed. "Not everything has to happen now."

Ben's face contorted into confusion again. He looked at Mal. "Have you not told her?" He asked.

Belle pulled a face. "Told me what?" She asked.

Mal exhaled. She supposed that this sick feeling must simply be the shock. She hadn't been expecting this and that was why she didn't feel very confident in her situation. She straightened up and pressed a hand to her belly, partly to stop her fingers from shaking and partly to give her mother-in-law a hint to what was going on. "Oh, it wasn't anything important," She mumbled. "Just something we learned yesterday."

Belle slapped a hand to her mouth. "No!" She shouted.

Ben frowned. "No?" He repeated. "You were the one questioning me on grandkids last Christmas."

Mal, too, felt a little shock by Belle's outburst. A little shocked and then a tiny smidge of relief because someone else was also unsure about this. Someone had a tiny voice screaming inside of them and worrying that she wasn't ready. On second thought, maybe that wasn't the best analogy.

"I thought you were waiting!" Belle exclaimed. "Oh, I'm so excited! So help me if you are lying to me-" She made a violent gesture at Ben that had Mal flinching back with him. He burst into laughter as Mal blushed a little. Belle wasn't angry; Belle was happy. Belle was supporting them.

Belle was on Ben's side.

'Don't divide people into sides,' she chastised herself. 'You and Ben are a team. And you know what, maybe you should talk to him if you're feeling a little worried. He can talk you through it.'

"How far are you?" Belle demanded, sitting up and letting the biggest, brightest smile Mal had ever seen on her mother-in-law decorate her face. Beside her, she could feel Ben's smile lighting the entire area up.

"Not far," She managed to get out. She took her hand away from her belly because, for some reason, the contact makes her feel sick. Unfortunately, the moment she took her hand away, Ben
moved his arm and slid his hand onto her torso in place of hers. Her belly churned. She paused to process all the chemicals running through her head and a pressure welled up behind her eyes like her brain was trying to escape. Ben skimmed his thumb over her belly button and set his head against hers. Mal could still feel his smile, warming the entire area. His hands, which have always been large compared to hers, almost completely covered her torso. His arms were like deadweights hanging on her body.

"You must be so excited!" Belle cheered. "I can't believe I'm going to be a grandma!"

Mal chuckled and leaned a little more into Ben's side, hoping to find some warmth and comfort there. "I think Ben has enough excitement for the both of us," she joked.

"Very true," Ben agreed, laughing and then moving his head to kiss the side of hers. "I can't believe I'm going to be a dad!"

Mal raised an eyebrow and managed to crack a smile despite the confusion in her head. He sounded exhilarated and excited and part of her is proud for causing and contributing to his joy. The other part feels a little confused and… scared. "What happened to waiting?" It asks. "What happened to being busy? What happened to not being ready?"

Everything was suddenly different and yeah, she understood why, but it was still hard to wrap her head around it and she wasn't sure she was ready to say goodbye to this perfect stage of life that she was in at the moment. She had it all – Ben, her dad, all her friends, the Isle, the Moors, her sister, everything.

Ben's hands moved a little and Mal's stomach twisted. She snapped into action, seizing his wrists and pushing his hands away. "That's enough!" She declared. Ben blinked at her in surprise. Mal chuckled to let him think she'd just been teasing. "Am I going to have to pry you off of my side every day for the next nine months?" She laughed and then reached out her hands for baby Madison, who Belle passes back without even batting an eye at Mal's attitude. Judging by the way he was laughing behind her, he wasn't thinking too hard about it either.

As she balanced Madison's head and flashed a smile down at her sister, Ben moved one hand back to her abdomen. She raised an eyebrow and looked over her shoulder at him. "If you think I won't notice that, you're wrong," she deadpanned.

Ben laughed. "I'm sorry. It's just a cool feeling. You're just going to have to deal with me being touchy."

Madison took the opportunity to screw up her nose and begin to cry. "Oh," Belle sighed, "She's probably hungry." Mal frowned and passed her sister back to Belle with a sigh. Belle took her and carefully put her up over her shoulder. "Well, I am beyond excited and I can't wait to meet my new grandchild, but this little girl tends to pick up dragon-like tendencies when she's hungry, so I'd better go."

Ben laughed. "Just like her older sister," he chuckled, smiling beside Mal's cheek.

Mal swatted at him half-heartedly. "Ha-ha," She scoffed.

Belle sat up and kissed both Mal and Ben's cheeks. "You're going to be amazing parents," She whispered.

Ben got to his feet and gave his mom a hug. "Well, we have a pretty great example," he assured her. Mal's fake smile vanished off of her face. She stared numbly at Belle as she put a hand to her
heart in a touched manner. Then, she turned and carried Madison away, leaving Mal to dwell on Ben's words in a spiraling, falling sort of feeling.

'This is a very important day! This is the day when all our dreams come true! She could hear her mother cackling in her head like some demented phone call from the past. She could feel hands guiding her out the door of her old home and her own life and Maleficent laughing as she called: "Bye, sweetie,")  

Ben took a seat in his mom's vacated place and then leaned over to pull her against his side. She let him, falling into his side and noticing that her skin was icy and cold. He laid one hand over her belly, light without any pressure, and then let the other fall over her shoulders with a bright, silly smile. She pulled her legs up onto the couch. "What are you feeling?" Her voice quivered as she asked.

Ben's eyes flicked over to hers and a chuckle left his lips. "I should be feeling guilty. I really should be. But I'm just so, so excited." He leaned his head against hers and closed her eyes. "This honestly feels amazing. I can't believe we're going to have a baby."

Amazing… excited….. Mal closed her eyes and tried to curl into him. He was radiating warmth and for some reason, she felt like cold was seeping out of her bones. "I'm feeling a bit… weird about it." She mumbled.

Immediately, Ben's posture changed. He sat up, tilted her head up to face him, and took her hands. Mal was forced to open her eyes again with a sigh. "Weird like what?" He asked. "Is it surreal? Are you worried? What can I help with?" He leaned forward and dropped his smile a little to show her that he was listening and cared about her thoughts.

"I'm just…" Mal tried to get her mouth around the words. It was like she couldn't say them. She was just feeling like her life had been flipped around. She was just feeling a little underprepared. She just felt like some sort of dark and nightmarish storm was welling up behind her and the moment she slipped up with this kid it would crash on her and drown her. "I'm just thinking about my mom," is what she said instead.

She sighed and decided to continue. "Like… my childhood and everything is officially over and my mom is gone and now it's someone else's turn."

"You're married," Ben pointed out with a raised eyebrow. "And you've always been very adamant on how you're not a child."

"I'm not!" Mal insisted. "But I'm just reflecting on how awful everything was on the Isle and how quickly I grew up and now I'm going to be giving my kid a completely different future in a world I didn't even get to know until I was sixteen."

"That makes sense," Ben nodded. "After all, they'll grow up in Auradon. The moorlands will be open and the Isle will be a perfectly respectable place." He squeezed her hand. "Does that scare you?"

Mal looked down at her fingers, looped around his hand. Belle was excited and when she'd had Ben, she'd felt like her entire world had come together. Ben felt amazing. He looked absolutely starstruck. But what about her? She didn't feel like the world was coming together. She didn't feel like every ray of sunshine was brighter. She felt like her life was extending onwards without her permission and that she didn't really have control of her own future. A chapter in her life that she wasn't writing and something she was being prepared for that she didn't know if she wanted.
She shrugged. "I don't quite know," she whispered. "I mean... I was less prepared to marry you than I am for this, but I just don't feel like I have a handle on it yet."

Ben let go of one of her hands and instead cupped her cheek a little. "That's okay," he nodded. "I understand it's a little weird. But hey, we'll get through this, okay? And I'm going to be here. I know it wasn't really anticipated, but I really think we can do this together and make it work."

Mal cracked a little smile and then exhaled. "What do you think my mom felt like when she got pregnant?" she asked.

Ben's happy, slightly subdued expression faded to give way to confusion. "Uh," he stammered and then laughed his awkwardness aside, "I, um, don't know? You knew your mom better than I did. I'm not really, um, qualified to guess what was going on in Maleficent's head." He trailed off, still chuckling awkwardly. Still, he squeezed her hand and moved his other palm, the one that had been on her cheek, to her knee instead. "What do you think she thought?"

That wasn't really the point of the exercise, Mal slumped. If she'd known, she wouldn't have asked. "I have no idea," she mumbled. "I guess... I mean... I hope she would have loved me, but..." she shrugged.

Ben slid closer and put an arm around her shoulders. "Do you miss her?" he whispered.

Mal shrugged again. "Not all the time," she admitted. "But now, yeah. How could I not?" Ben pursed his lips together for half-a-second and Mal wondered what he was thinking. It could be anything from 'Of course you miss her' to 'how could you want that witch back?' She swallowed. "She was my mom. And she went through this too. I wish she was around for me to ask questions and... get prepared."

"Well, there's my mom," Ben pointed out, turning to gesture towards where Belle had disappeared. "And, uh, you're friends with Elsa, right? She has two girls."

"Yeah, but they didn't raise me," Mal stressed. She was aware that the concept of raising children would have been phenomenally different from the Isle Maleficent had had Mal on and from the Auradon that Mal's family would grow up in, but the advice and the conversation would have been nice. Any conversation, actually. Thinking back on it, she couldn't ever remember a time she'd just talked with her mom, and that made her feel a little cheated. "I didn't grow up with them."

"Ah," Ben nodded in understanding. He hesitated and then moved his hand back from her knee and onto her belly, again. Mal felt a little like throwing up. She took a long, slow breath. "I love you, and I love them, and I wish I could bring Maleficent back and force her to be a good parent to you." He kissed her cheek. "If there is anything that you want to talk to me about, though, I'll be here. Just let me know."

The words were stuck on the tip of her tongue. 'I'm not feeling well. I really don't know if I'm ready for this. Is there anywhere I can go for help? I feel upset and I feel guilty because everyone else is acting like this is amazing and I'm just not sure yet.' But she stayed silent and nodded a little, and Ben got to his feet. He looked content to assume he'd been able to help her a little bit as he squeezed her hand one last time and then let go. "I have to go up to my office and get some things," he announced. "You going anywhere?"

"My office," Mal agreed. "I'll head up in a moment." She leaned back on the couch and Ben smiled and then disappeared, on his way to the door. She heard it shut behind him and stared at the tips of the mural on the wall in a daze. Was something wrong with her? Why wasn't she happy and smiling and as giddy as Ben and Belle were? Maybe something was off in her head.
Maybe she wasn't ready for this.

Maybe… maybe… maybe…

The thought repeated itself all day long, following her wherever she went. It followed her to work and through the motions before she was heading back upstairs and into her room and breaking down a little.

She closed herself into the bathroom and examined her reflection. Pregnant. Mal stared at herself in the mirror in the bathroom and slowly brought her hands to her belly. She wasn't quite sure how to feel about this. How should she feel about this?

Mal closed her eyes and thought of Ben, eyes bright and smile wide, constantly wanting to find new excuses to touch her belly. She imagined his quiet obsession and the excited light in his eyes. He was happy. This was a good thing. He was glad.

Mal lifted her shirt up as she continued considering her situation. Her husband, who was five years older than her, had gotten her pregnant, and he was happy about the idea that they were going to have a baby together. It wasn't a horrible place to be. Truthfully, it shouldn't be too hard on her, even despite her age. She was young, but she was strong, and Ben would help her every step. But that didn't change the fact that Ben was going to make her a teen mom months after she came of age in Auradon. She exhaled and her stomach turned. A teen mom. She couldn't believe that was her. She'd always wondered if it'd be Evie, but never her.

As the blood rushed to her head, she took a seat on the bathroom floor and squeezed her midsection. A million thoughts filled her head. She was pregnant. There was a little child inside of her. Ben's little child. A tiny Ben and Mal. Mal abruptly covered her eyes in shock as the light started to blare down into her head. She was going to have to carry and birth and raise Ben's child, all over a matter of months and then years. Mal imagined for a few seconds what childbirth would look like and the very poignant image of her splitting into two made her brain feel like it was being stretched and contracted over and over, almost as if someone were blowing a balloon up and letting the air out again.

And even if she did survive… she'd still have to leave for the Moors. The Isle would still need her help. And depending on how long the war went, she might have to balance Auradon too. How could she possibly do it all? She couldn't always be leaving her baby with her in-laws but taking a month-old heir of Auradon's throne on a day's trip into a different magical country for a month or even taking her baby into the Isle of the Lost wasn't exactly a feasible situation. She couldn't leave the baby with dad until they were older and couldn't leave them with dad at all if Dad with leading the country in war.

A baby. That was another thought. She tried to imagine herself with a baby. Tried to imagine holding Ben's little boy or girl while he looked over her shoulder. The image of a purple-haired... princess had her covering her face as her heart thudded against her chest. Someone like Evie or Audrey who was obsessed with curled hair and jewelry and dresses and boys while their mom was very much... not.

This kid was going to be an Auradon heir to the throne. Maleficent's grandchild. They were going to grow up hearing all the stories of her mother's atrocious acts and the lies that covered why Mal, her daughter, had been allowed to ascend a throne. She'd be lying to her own children. She'd be lying to her children, always gone running at least two other countries, and they'd be hearing about how evil Maleficent had been. Oh gosh, what if they hated her?
Mal's breath came out in heavy huffs as foggy tears clouded her vision. The lights were beating down on her with clubs from above. She dug her fingers into the skin of her stomach and the door suddenly opened. Mal straightened up immediately, but a confused look still crossed Ben's face as he spotted her sitting on the floor, eyes unfocused and fingers crossed across her belly. "Mal?" He asked.

Mal blinked against the bright lights and made to act as if she'd been brushing her shirt down and not hallucinating what it'd feel like when her belly was about to split. "I'm okay," She declared, even as Ben took a few quick strides into the bathroom and knelt down beside her.

"Are you feeling sick?" He asked, examining her from head to toe. Mal watched him outstretch a hand and put it on her stomach, curling the tips of his fingers into her skin comfortingly. Mal's stomach curled.

"No," She lied. "I'm fine."

Ben examined her with dismay creeping into his eyes. "Why are you lying?" he asked, and Mal's shoulders slumped in dismay. She wished he'd never learned to spot her lies.

"I'm okay," she insisted, softening her tone and hoping that telling half-truths instead of whole-truths would convince Ben's sharp eyes of her lies. "Just a stomach ache."

Keeping his one hand on her midsection, he brought the other one up to cup her cheek. "Are you sure?" He whispered. Mal nodded without comment and leaned forward into his shoulder. He immediately pulled her into his grasp and ran his fingertips up and down her back. Mal took a few careful inhales of his scent before Ben rearranged her in his arms. He turned her so she was leaning against his chest and uncurled his legs to lean back against the tub. Then he splayed both of his hands out on her belly and set his chin into her shoulder. "I'm sorry you're not feeling well," He whispered.

Mal hummed wistfully. He began rubbing little circles on her belly and Mal squeezed her eyes shut. "What do you think they'll be?" He whispered. "Boy or girl?"

"Dunno," Mal replied, trying to curl back into him. "I don't really want to talk about it right now," She mumbled.

Ben turned her head towards him. His frown had returned, casting sharp lines across his face. "Are you sure you're okay?" He asked.

Mal nodded and began to pull herself out of his arms. "Yeah. I just don't feel like talking about it right now." She kissed his cheek and wandered out of the bathroom. Ben followed her out into the living room and then stood in the doorway of the bedroom while she fell onto her side of the bed and curled up, facing the window. He glanced at the alarm clock and then walked over and leaned towards her to run his fingers through her hair. Mal closed her eyes and squeezed her stomach.

How could she do this? How could she raise his kid when she was barely an adult herself?

What was she talking about? She was an adult. It wasn't like childhood was a necessary experience on the Isle, and she'd been queen for a year.

"I have an extra hour," Ben hummed. "Maybe we could-"

"I don't want to." Mal interrupted, squeezing her eyes shut. she had no idea what he'd been about to suggest. It could have been anything from climbing the palace, sparring, or watching movies, but now she'd never know. She felt his hand stall on her ear and then heard him hum. She remembered
him talking to Ericka after a fight with her. "Teenagers," he'd sighed, and she curled her legs closer to her chest as she recalled the tone of voice he'd made the comment in. Maybe she was being irrational. Maybe he was rolling his eyes at her dramatics.

Mal opened her eyes and examined her husband. "Do you think I'll be okay?" She asked.

Ben furrowed his brow at her, examining her carefully. "About our baby?" He asked.

Mal closed her eyes again and nodded, snuggling into the sheets. "I'm busy," She reminded him by way of clarification. "How can I do the Isle and the Moorlands and Auradon while still being a good wife to you and a good friend and then adding in being a mom to all that?" At the word 'mom', Mal's stomach twisted so violently that she felt recurring pangs in her chest. Ben drew a thumb down her cheek.

"Not without help." He mumbled. "But you have Audrey to help with the Isle and people in the moors to help you, and your friends love you, and you'll be an amazing wife no matter what, and I'm going to help you learn to be a mom while you help me learn to be a dad." Mal nodded a little to his words. He knelt down at the side of the bed and Mal opened her eyes. "It's overwhelming, huh?" He whispered. Mal nodded again.

Ben leaned over her and gave her a slightly open-mouthed kiss on the cheek. "You're going to be a great mom," He whispered. "Our kids are so lucky. They're going to love you with all their little hearts. I can already see you teaching them magic and showing them the Isle and everything. You're going to be incredible."

Mal swallowed. "I don't know if I'm ready." She confessed. "I mean, my life is so busy. How can I make time for a baby? And with my mom as she was, how can I possibly love them like I should and raise them like your parents raised you?"

"Calm down," Ben instructed, "You will be ready. We both will be. I'm going to be here every step of the way and at every milestone. As for raising them like I was raised, I don't think we should. After all, I run my kingdom differently than my parents did because it's what the kingdom needs. I think it makes sense for us to raise our kids the way they need to be raised." He stroked the side of her face and inhaled. "Mal, you have an amazing capability for love. You blow me away every day, and not just because you're an Isle girl who learned to love."

Mal hummed and the scooted over and patted the spot next to her. Ben sat down on the bed beside her and laid down to pull her into his chest. "Does that help at all?" He whispered. Mal mumbled an unintelligible response. In truth, her stomach was turning and her head was spinning. She was sure that she wasn't supposed to be like this - that being pregnant shouldn't feel like this. And especially in Auradon, where she was almost guaranteed an easy pregnancy and a safe birth and all the doctors and painkillers she could want. This wasn't the dark Isle of the Lost.

She must not be ready. She must not be prepared to be responsible for someone like this. Kingdoms and children, no matter how well Ben's analogy had worked, were very different. Maybe Mal wasn't ready to be a mom. She swallowed. That must be it. She wasn't ready.

Ben unwrapped a hand from around her body to press his palm onto her belly. Mal felt a small surge of bile run up her throat. She wanted her body back.

Mal pressed both of her palms onto Ben's shoulders. She could feel his chest moving underneath her touch as he breathed. "How much longer do we have?" She whispered.

Ben glanced at the alarm clock again. "A little less than an hour." He mumbled. "Do you want to
stay here and curl up together or do you want to try and get up to watch a -"

"I'm okay to stay here," Mal interrupted him again. "Care to distract me?" She reached up and began unbuttoning his shirt to better get to his chest.

Ben's frown returned. "I thought you weren't feeling well?" He reminded her.

Mal sighed dramatically. "That's why I said 'distract me'." She told him, pushing his shirt folds back and then pressing her cheek against his skin. Her fingers drifted down and started messing with his belt, trying to find the end of it. Mal could feel his body reacting to her - his heartbeat speeding up and his arms growing tense around her - but he wasn't sold yet. He stopped her hands, paused to let out a heavy breath, and then cleared his throat.

"Are you sure that you're okay?" He whispered. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Mal furrowed her brow. "It's just a stomacheache." She insisted. "It doesn't have anything to do with the, uh, baby." She broke eye contact to examine his muscles.

"Do you need me to get you anything?" Ben asked.

"I don't need anyone to get me anything," Mal snapped and pinched her lips together.

Ben rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know," he laughed. Mal glared at him a little and then her fingers returned to their task of removing his belt. This time, Ben didn't protest.

"We need to talk about something," John Smith announced. His voice was a deep rumble that called everyone to attention and extinguished the small conversations going on. The table rumbled a little as he set his forearms on the wooden surface and leaned forward. "King Ben," he called, glancing down to the head of the table. Ben, who had begun twirling his pen in his fingertips the moment John called for attention, paused in spinning the cool plastic tube to straighten up. "You've been steadily avoiding talking about where you're going to be in the coming weeks. So, tell us now, are you not going north?"

Ben saw people's attentive faces turn blank, and then several angry expressions turned towards him. He set his pen down on top of his tablet and straightened up. This was the conversation he had been dreading.

"I am not," He admitted. "I have to be here for Auradon."

Several people began to shout in protest, but Ben held up a hand to stop them. "We're a one-branch Monarchy with a lower council that doesn't often meet. My responsibilities extend into Judicial, Legislative, and Executive sections. There is no feasible way for me to complete all of that and also command a war. That's why I'm appointing generals, who know more about battles than I do anyway,"

"I'm sorry, what is Queen Mal around for, then?" King Florian, Snow White's husband, protested. "She's the queen. Have her cover paperwork and you go north with everyone else; we need a leader."

"Or send her north," Ericka suggested, though many council member's faces contorted in disapproval. It was clear that they'd rather have Ben, the 'Actually-In-Charge' person over Mal, the 'Somewhat-In-Charge' person. "Both of you are pretty adept fighters."

Send Mal to fight. The thought made Ben queasy. He shook his head. "I can't give Auradon to
Mal," He declared. "The 'Queen' title isn't in full-force. She isn't qualified to lead Auradon, and I'm not qualified to lead the Moorlands or the Isle."

"She's coronated, isn't she?" Elsa asked, drumming her fingernails on the table. "Why isn't she qualified?"

Doug, who was standing behind Ben in the event he was needed to fix the microphone or the screen systems, leaned forward with a frown. "Didn't we train her?" He asked. "I could have sworn you and her had a spat about her writing a letter to her mom or something."

Ben's cheeks turned bright red. Adam turned and began to drum his fingers in a silent signal that he was curious about that story. "That was over a year ago and on Dad's system, not mine," Ben reminded Doug. "And she's developed a system all her own for the Isle and the Moorlands."

"But couldn't we retrain her?" Doug wanted to know.

"She can't rule all three countries at once!" Ben snapped. "It's already hard enough, dividing her attention between two!"

"Well, have her drop the other two," Chad suggested. "Auradon is the only one that matters anyway."

"We could always redraw the Isle back into Auradon," Adam suggested, raising an eyebrow at Ben. Ben glared at his dad.

"No, you idiots!" Audrey snapped. "They're separate and it's better that way. And Chad, just you watch! One day, the Isle is going to outdo Auradon. They have the harder workers."

"Yeah, and let's not piss off the extremely powerful magic-using country who apparently we've already accidentally attacked once," Ericka suggested sarcastically. She summoned a snowflake, which she let dance around her fingertips even as some of the other royals glared at her. Elsa nudged her daughter carefully.

Adam stood up. "Ben, she's the queen. The arrangement has always been that, in the event you are incapacitated, Mal would have to be in charge of Auradon. It is your duty and responsibility to lead your country in this war you are beginning, and it is hers to take care of things here. She agreed to that long, long ago."

"That was before she had the Moorlands," Ben reminded his dad, straightening his shoulders. He didn't like how Adam was commanding him around as if he was in charge of this escapade. "It was before everything that has happened recently."

"The promise still holds," Adam declared. "She agreed to this responsibility before the moorlands and before anything else. Before the Isle, before she was queen, her first obligations were to Auradon. She should have considered a situation like this before agreeing to lead the moors."

Adam reached down for a water bottle and took a long sip. "And if not her anticipating this, you should have known in your decision to begin war that she would have to pick up your slack."

"Is this some sort of twisted revenger for not telling you before I made the decision?" Ben snapped.

Adam shook his head. "No," he denied. "I'm just pointing out how you should have known you would be asked to go. It's your duty. Your responsibility."

He had known. They had talked about it. He had known what he was getting into. But that was before everything. Before Mal had lost her mother. Before they'd received the prophecy that
everything would go wrong. Before they'd learned Mal was expecting.

Ben shook his head. "I think the situation should be regarded as if I weren't married at all. Mal's work life is completely separate from mine and that shouldn't change due to an interruption in my country."

"No, it absolutely should change!" Phillip disagreed. "You made a decision that makes it imperative that she should step up. Regardless of how often she's usually pictured in Auradon's politics! You need to come north with us. The first train leaves on Saturday and I think that you should be on it. We're sending some of our strongest recruits and our youth up. The king should go with them."

"She's our queen," Aurora agreed. "It's about time she stepped to the plate and acted like it."

"Yes!" Merida agreed, nodding along to them both. Several others were shouting their agreement; their voices hammered into Ben's head.

Li Shang spoke up with anger and disappointment lacing his tone. "My daughter is going north; away from our family for the first time where she may die." He pointed up the table to Ben, finger shaking as he grit out: "And if the best swordsman in the country, the king of us all, won't go, I see no reason why I should send my flesh and blood."

Fa Mulan set a hand on her husband's and leaned over the table to make eye contact with Ben. Her slanted eyes made it seem like she was glaring as she examined him. "The war must be very important to you if your wife's discomfort is all that is stopping you from going."

"Have any of you led more than one country?" Ben demanded, staring at them all. "Not kingdoms; countries! It is not an easy feat! She is seventeen years old and you expect me to leave everything on her shoulders?"

"She is capable," Ericka shrugged. "Capable and smart. She can handle it."

Down the table, Flynn Rider slapped a hand on the table. "Here's my two cents!" He declared. "I'll send you soldiers if you want. We'll produce whatever and do whatever. I know I can't fight the federal palace and I'm not interested in trying!" For a second, Ben might have been deceived that Flynn was standing up for him, but then the older man swept his gaze up the table to join the rest of the crowd in glaring at him. "But if you won't go up with the young people we're sending, to fight and to protect them, I will let everyone know why. You can't dictate the free speech of the kingdoms – I will publish articles and announce things in public squares and do everything I can to spread the word of how you won't go because you don't think the wife you picked out can handle your work." Flynn crossed his arms. "And you can deal with that public backlash," he finished.

Ben closed his mouth. There was no point in arguing. They already had it in their minds what he needed to do. He couldn't explain the prophecy without digging himself a bigger hole. He was positive that news of Mal's condition would be just as poorly met, especially with Chad in the room.

Adam set a hand down on Ben's shoulder. "Everything will be fine," He promised. "Your mother and I and Mal will run Auradon. And when her time comes, we will see to it that she is taken care of."

Ben swatted his dad's hand away. "Okay, dad, you listen here," He snapped leveling his gaze at the former beast. "You will not be running Auradon. Neither will mom. If I'm leaving, Mal is in charge, and you will answer to the queen just like every other citizen." He stood up and began
gathering his things.

"Her time?" Audrey asked, furrowing her brow. Ben paused to glance over at her. The room was very still. People were exchanging soft, unsure glances. Ben glared towards Adam, who had the decency to look ashamed at having announced something so abruptly, and then went to shutting down his tablet so he could leave.

Adam cleared his throat. "Mal is with child. She'll be delivered in the summer." He told the group. Several people exchanged sympathetic, surprised expressions, but no one opened their mouths to protest that maybe Ben should stay after all. Duty came before family, apparently.

Chad snorted and then began to cough. He turned away in his seat as a fire alit in Ben's Belly. "Don't say a word, Chad!" He demanded. "You have nothing good to say – nothing I haven't already heard. Why don't you tell your mother about how you said you'd like to slam my wife?"

Audrey's mouth dropped open as several cries of outrage echoed around the room. Chad's face turned puce and Queen Ella's arm snapped out to grab his shoulder. "Is that what you told her?" She demanded. Chad wouldn't meet her eyes. Ben almost felt bad for calling him out on his words as he watched Ella withdraw from her son, cradling the hand she'd touched his shoulder with as if it were broken. Her expression was one of utter heartbreak.

Beside Ben, Adam growled in his seat. Ben scoffed and gathered all his things into his arms. "I'm done," He announced to the room. "If I have to go, fine. Just… let me talk with my wife and figure things out with her."

"Ben," Audrey stood up, looking like she wanted to ask him something. Ben didn't turn to look at her. He wrenched the door open and walked away.

As Mal reached for a bowl on the table, she heard a thud of the door opening. She turned and watched Ben remove his coat before dropping it onto the back of the chair beside her. Then, hands braced on the back of the chair and not meeting her eyes, he let out a long, disappointed sigh.

The bowl slipped out of Mal's hands and landed with a Thwack on the table. Luckily, she hadn't been able to lift it very far off the table, so nothing spilled over. "No!" She moaned, staring at Ben as he flinched at both the sound and her immediate, already-knowing response. Down the table, Adam exhaled and looked down at his food as Belle frowned, looking confused.

"I know," Ben mumbled, reaching for her hand. Mal yanked it out of his reach, and then slowly let him have it. Every vein and nerve ending in her body was pleading with her to take action. She struggled to keep herself together so she could be supportive.

"When do you leave?" She gasped.

"With the first wave," Ben whispered as Belle suddenly realized what was going on and her mouth dropped open in horror. "Saturday."

Mal's chin thudded against her chest as her entire face contorted. "Well," She exhaled. "They – they'll need you up there. Your leadership and your swordsmanship… you'll be amazing."

"Mal, I'm sorry, I really am," Ben whispered, kneeling down by her chair. "I know it's a lot to ask of you, especially now, and I'm sorry."

"We can step in and help her," Adam announced from the end of the table.
"Dad," Ben began in a firm, bone-chilling tone. "This isn't your kingdom anymore. Stop stepping in and trying to educate me on how to run my country. This isn't your Auradon anymore."

Mal opened her eyes and stared at her empty plate. "I can't do it all, Ben," She reminded him in a hollow tone. "You can't expect me to."

"No, of course not," Ben shook his head, putting his hands on her shoulders and squeezing a little. "But you're in charge. Don't let Dad step on you." Adam bristled at the description but didn't protest at Ben's sharp look. Mal had a feeling that his dad had overstepped him in a meeting again but decided to not focus on it.

Belle set her fork down. "How long will you be gone?" She asked. Mal glanced up in time to watch Ben's eyes close.

"A couple of months, at the least," he mourned. "I mean, it's war on another continent. There isn't really a way to reasonably send everyone home for Christmas."

"So, at the longest?" She whispered.

Ben shrugged. "However long the war lasts," he replied. "Could be a few months or it could be…" He trailed off.

"Years?" Mal supplied. Ben nodded in agreement.

"When are you due?" Belle asked, looking down the table at Mal, who was now the center of attention.

She swallowed. "June, probably." Counting back from mid-ish September… She might even be due closer to the beginning of July. Of course, she could always be wrong, and she hadn't even considered that she might be different from someone who wasn't half-fae and half-god, but that was the best guesstimate she had.

Cold, invisible hands clawed at her chest. She could be alone. She could be alone and three, five, nine months pregnant. She could be alone with a one, two or five-year-old baby. And all three countries.

"I need to talk to you," Ben mumbled, pressing his hands a bit deeper into her shoulders.

"Yeah," Mal agreed, pushing her plate back. "Yeah." She got to her feet.

"It doesn't have to be now!" Ben protested, holding his hands up to block her path. "Mal, you still need to eat."

Mal looked back at her lonely, clean plate. "I'm not hungry," She shook her head dejectedly.

"You have to eat, Mal," Belle whispered, rising up out of her chair. "It's not just you, anymore."

That was a clever way of putting things, Mal thought. Not just you. Think about the baby too, Mal. Stop being selfish, Mal. This isn't all about you, Mal.

Ben squeezed her arm. "I know it's hard. I know you're upset. But I don't want you to go hungry or get sick. You'll think better on a full stomach anyway." That, at least, was a reasonable argument. Mal knew it was selfish, but it helped that Ben was acknowledging her feelings instead of trying to throw their baby into her face. She allowed him to lean forward, pick up her plate, and hand it to her. "Let's eat up in our room," he suggested.
They both filled their plates, her with barely anything because her mind was so, so far away. He paused to go up and hug his mom, who teared up as she tried to contain her grief at having to let him go. She kissed her cheek and then went back to Mal. With a firm, supportive hand to her back and with a plate of food in each of their hands, they left the room and began to head for the upstairs.

When they reached their room, Ben opened the door for her. She walked over to the couch and set her plate onto the coffee table before she proceeded to slump into the cushions and stare at it like she couldn't even recognize what function it held. Ben sat in a chair beside her and handed her plate back to her. "Come on," He prodded. "You have to eat something."

Mal held her hands out, refusing to receive it, and exhaled. "What is Auradon looking like right now?" She asked.

"Too soon to tell," Ben exhaled, squeezing her knee before withdrawing into himself. "I'll tell you as soon as I have some concrete information."

Mal closed her eyes. "Maybe… Audrey can help me cover the Isle and I can find someone in the Moors who I can trust to not try and attack Auradon behind my back." The words sounded hollow in her mouth. "And Evie, Jay, and Carlos might be able to help me if they aren't too busy with college."

"Things are going to speed up on the Auradon federal front," Ben mumbled. "Resource spreads and war expenses and records of who's fighting and where they're stationed."

Mal slumped her shoulders with a tight nod. Death counts would also begin coming in. Searches for people who went missing. She'd be the one Auradon looked to for information about whether or not their loved ones would be coming home. "Is there any chance at all that you might be able to come back to help me? It'll be harder for me to keep everything up as time goes on and-" Mal stopped, exhaling a little. She didn't want to provide any specifics. This was real enough as it was and she didn't want to make Ben feel more guilty. "I'm going to need lots of help by June."

Ben dropped his head, looking absolutely miserable. "I wish I could," he sighed. "But I doubt I'll be able to. It's not exactly an easy feat to get everyone up there and none of the court members will want me taking advantage of my position to come back. If I could transport myself, maybe, but to have Jack or one of the dragons take me there or back…" He trailed off.

Mal ran her hands through her hair. "So, you're up north in war, leading people into battle, and I'm here with all three countries and a baby on the way?"

"Can you do it?" Ben asked, peering over at her with worried eyes. Mal snorted. They both knew it wasn't a matter of if she could do it. She had to. "I know it's unfair to ask, and I wish there was something I could do about it, but Auradon needs me. Can you cover for me?"

"Not in the same degree," Mal whispered. "But you already know I'll do my best. I'm going to need lots of help, though."

"My parents are here," Ben nodded. "And I bet Audrey would love to help with the Isle. Eliza too."

Mal sniffed a little as her nose began to ache. "We don't have any plans for when the baby is born yet, either. I know you said people don't usually plan in advance, but maybe we should talk about it a little. Sophia mentioned a coronation. I would probably have to handle that, right?"

"Fairy Godmother can help with that," Ben assured her. "And mom. Any of the other queens,
actually. Merida's husband arranged all of their coronations." He leaned over and squeezed her hand. "Luckily, announcing a royal baby isn't really a formal thing anymore. You could honestly just use your palace blog like we did with the announcement of you as queen. That's most of the legal drama. What I'm concerned about is if you have to balance the three kingdoms and a newborn. Maybe we'll have to get a nanny to pay someone to take care of the baby for you."

"Pay someone else to raise our baby?" Mal repeated, staring at him with a deadpan expression. "I can't believe you suggested that."

"It's not a deadbeat thing to do," Ben frowned. "This situation is unfair and you can't do everything. Mom and Dad already have Madison and they won't be able to balance helping you with the baby and the kingdom and taking care of Madison. They're old."

"But not raising our baby?" Mal asked. "That's a grand solution. Make it more unfair on someone who doesn't even exist yet."

"Well, what would you suggest?" Ben asked. Mal fell silent. He had a very solid, very unfortunate point.

Mal twisted her hands and cleared her throat. She reached over for his hand and he gave her his right. She brushed it aside to grab his left hand – the one with his ring. His ring that had come from his grandparents with the word 'forever' underneath the band. She twined their fingers together and took a deep breath. "What if you die?" She whispered.

Ben squeezed her fingers in a vice grip like he was holding onto a lifeline. "Well," He exhaled, "Auradon will be yours." Mal shook her head in bitter denial. Ben lifted his free hand and ran his thumb down her cheek. Tears had appeared there without her permission. "Our baby will have to be Auradon's future leader. If you choose to remarry, you could have more children or you could stop with our one and, well, I'll leave you to make decisions on the Isle and the Moors."

Mal shook her head at him and began to wipe her eyes. "What am I supposed to do without you?" She sobbed.

Ben immediately got up and gathered her up in his grip. They curled up on the couch together, her crying against his shoulder, and him holding her tightly, like he was trying to imprint the way she felt into his arms. They didn't say anything. They both knew it would be a long time before either of them were okay.

Car doors were slamming, sounding like someone was pounding nails into a door and barring her inside. Mal watched from the entryway, gazing out the little windows beside the door, as heroes left, one by one. The councils were over. Everything was decided. It was Saturday, and Ben was leaving today with everyone else. He, Lonnie, Chad, and a couple other friends from Auradon Swords and Shields would be heading towards the train station in Auradon city, where other volunteers were already boarding.

She felt a little more Auradon than usual, which she supposed had a lot to do with the crown set at a tilt on her forehead. She had no idea why she was wearing it still; Ben had pulled it out and set it on her hair with a soft smile before he'd picked up his suitcase and set his sword – the one with his name on the hilt that Mal had once battle him for – beside it. She hadn't worn the crown since she'd gotten it, she thought. Belle's old decoration simply sat in her nightstand drawer, waiting for its next owner.

Maybe it was fitting she was wearing it, now that she actually had to step up and be queen.
She pulled her sweater a little tighter around herself. It was long and knit and white hanging off her shoulders and she hated it even though it was protecting her against the bitter early October Chill that had been leaving icy marks on all the palace windows. It looked like something someone might wrap around an enlarged stomach. Something to just remind her of her situation. Add in the white – the symbol of cleanliness and purity that came packaged more like Auradon and less like the Isle and the Moors and… she was miserable. For more reasons than one.

The door opened and Ben and Lumiere appeared, cheeks red and hats pulled over their foreheads. Lumiere looked distraught. Ben looked resigned. He stopped when he saw her, and she watched his mouth crook up a little when he saw the crown. At least the jewels were good for humor.

Lumiere said nothing. He slipped up the stairs and disappeared. Ben shut the door they'd entered through and pulled off his gloves. He reached out and took the crown before he righted it on her head. "Whatever happened to the crown from the moorlands?" He asked.

"I don't really pay attention to crowns," She sighed. "I decided I don't like the extra height they give me. I'll stick with combat boots instead."

Ben laughed, taking her face with both hands. "Your highness." Even though they'd been protected by gloves, his fingers were cold. "You look like you stepped out of an Auradon department store," He whispered. "Where's my Isle girl?"

"Well, I've got to be Auradonian now," Mal sighed, gesturing to his combat outfit. "You took all the Isle fashion and you're going north with it and leaving me behind." She reached out and fixed his collar with a frown. "How come you get to go fight and I have to stay here with the politics? I thought you wanted to be the guy, you know? The fix-it guy."

Ben squeezed her cheek. "Maybe Auradon could use a little Isle. I mean, it's true what Audrey has been saying. I have a people softened and moved to indifference by comfort. This is your opportunity to, I don't know…change some laws. Get some things done."

"Fix the laws on magic so I can legally turn Chad Charming into a fish?" Mal suggested.

Ben snorted. "Yeah, okay," He rolled his eyes. "Just leave some Auradon for me to come back to, okay?"

Mal shook her head. "This isn't my country. You know I'm just going to keep doing things the way you do them, right?"

"So… change the laws on magic so you can legally turn Chad Charming into a fish and back, right?" Ben clarified. Mal laughed and leaned her forehead against his so their noses touched. Her crown slid off her head, so she pulled it off and looped it on her arm like an oversized bracelet. Ben laughed. He kissed her cheek first and then let his mouth hover there before he moved to her lips and gave her a long, sweet goodbye kiss.

Mal put her hands behind his neck with her crown catching on her shoulder. She didn't want to have to let him go. This was the last kiss they would share for months, maybe. She pressed them together, kissing him harder and harder and harder, begging someone to step in and say: "Sike! He doesn't have to go after all!"

She only stopped when someone burst into laughter on the stairs. "Geesh, Ben, don't you think that's enough?" A girl laughed. Ben released her, and they both turned to watch Lonnie slide down the railing with a bag of swords swung over her shoulder and some of the Isle stun guns attached to her hip. Behind her was Chad Charming, looking disgusted. Lonnie clapped him on the shoulder.
"Come on! Let's go! We'll be back soon enough. There's kingdoms and adventure and glory up there!" She pulled open the door and she and Chad slipped out. Ben watched them go.

"Kingdoms and adventure and glory," Mal scoffed. Ben nodded sadly. His kingdom, adventure, and glory were all beside him. He sighed, taking her elbow, and pulling him into his arms one last time.

"Well, at least I know you'll be safe," He whispered. "You know, I'd rather be gone then have to let you go. This way, I know both you and our little one will be safe." He put a hand to her belly, both ignoring the cold drifting in through the open door. "Take care of them for me, okay?"

"Of course," Mal agreed with a bitter taste in her mouth.

Ben pulled his gloves back on over his hands and then exhaled as he turned back began to head for the door. Mal followed him. Outside, the last of the royal representative were leaving, and those who were going north were hanging beside a series of black cars that would take them to the northbound train. Mal watched Lonnie dump her swords into the trunk of one, pumping a fist into the air in excitement, before she socked Chad Charming on the arm with a bright smile. "Wish I could go with you," She mumbled.

Ben shook his head. "I'd rather you stay here," he admitted. He took her jaw and kissed her one last time. His friends laughed and catcalled from the cars, prompting him to end it much quicker than she would have liked. He wiped a tear out from under her eye. "Don't be sad. I'll be back soon," He promised. "I love you."

"I love you too," Mal hiccupped.

Ben turned and headed off of the porch. He bumped fists with his friends beside the cars as Mal stayed close to the large palace, pulling her ridiculous sweater close around herself. She watched them all as they climbed inside, away from the stinging cold, and she saw every time Ben turned to look back at her.

Did you survive? Evie whispered as they exchanged hugs that night, sitting in the stands and waiting for the team. Stewart watched the crowds around them, dressed inconspicuously as a college sports fan, and making sure no one had noticed her.

"I'm okay," Mal nodded. "He's only been gone for a few hours. I haven't even noticed a difference yet." Besides the fact his office was empty, Belle was sad, Adam was coming to pester her about things he wanted to check in Ben's absences, and the fact she had Ben's cell phone in her pocket. Why had she thought that was a good idea, again? They never exchanged their cell phones. Carrying his around was only going to remind her of how abnormal the situation was. But the lock screen was a photo of him and her at Christmastime and it made her happy and sad and angry all at once.

"We're sitting over there," Evie pointed to a spot in front. "And look, there's Jay on the field." She pointed, and Mal nodded as she let Evie led her and Stewart to the bleachers, where college kids were stomping their feet and screaming. Several of Evie's new friends were sitting there – Mal could tell who they were based on their makeup and clothes. Carlos was fiddling with a computer that looked almost as fancy as the ones at the palace, and a dog was lying on both his lap and the lap of the girl next to him, who was wearing a light blue.

"Remember Jane?" Evie pointed to the girl. "Carlos invited her for tonight. And that's-" She rattled off a series of names that made Mal's head spin, so she just nodded and took a seat by Carlos, who
glanced at her and then smiled a little.

"You're alive, you're here, and you're not crying," He observed. "Looks like you're holding yourself together."

Mal pulled a face. "Did you think I wouldn't?" She asked.

"You did fall apart on the Isle," Evie hummed. "And he was less than ten miles away, then."

"He had been captured by Gaston," Mal deadpanned. "Beast's son? Gaston? It is a literal miracle he wasn't hurt."

"Hey, Evie!" A familiar voice called, Mal turned to watch Doug appear. He sat down beside Evie on the bleachers and suddenly the two were talking so quickly that Mal could hardly understand what they were talking about. She heard the terms 'Atoms', 'Electronegativity', and 'thermodynamics' before she turned her head to the other side to find Carlos and Jane equally caught up in a conversation, which Carlos alternating between petting his dog and then setting his hand on Jane's.

And that's when Mal realized she was sitting in between two couples.

The game was a frenzy of college students pounding on the bleachers and screaming, Evie pointing out Jay's number to her over and over again and again as the players rushed back and forth, passing the ball and dashing through the kill zone. The sun went down and florescent lights lit up her vision in painful ways. A headache started in the first part of the game and never went away. When they won, everyone dashed onto the field and Jay lifted her up in the air with a yell once he spotted her purple hair. He kissed her cheek, and Evie's. A dull heartache started in Mal's chest. Doug and Evie twisted their hands together and held them aloft in the air. The heartache grew worse.

That night, when they were passing around drinks Mal wasn't allowed to have at a place Stewart wasn't sure she was supposed to be at and with people who Mal didn't want to be with anyways, Carlos kissed Jane for the first time on the hood of someone else's car, and that was when she was done. The heartache had turned into a searing pain that seemed centered in her head, her heart, and the phone in her pocket.

She asked Stewart to take her home.

Ben was gone and the castle was empty. Looking back, she'd never actually been here without knowing Ben wasn't also under the same roof. He'd never been gone without her before. She curled up in the bed alone that night and clamped her mouth shut as she cried. For the first time ever, Ben wasn't there to welcome her home. It was a sad thought to her.

Meanwhile, Ben, Chad Charming, Li Lonnie, Gordon Dwarf, Prince Artie, Tiger Peony, and dozens of other sons and daughter of the Auradonian heroes headed north on a train with an assortment of weapons. As everyone passed around soda and played cards to pass the time, Ben watched the night sky through a window of the train.

Somewhere under these stars was Mal. She had no way of knowing how much he missed her. He had no way of knowing how much she missed him. He had no way of knowing whether she'd had a good time at Jay's game and the afterparty and whether she was okay and he couldn't even ask Lumiere to bring her some strawberries because he'd left his phone at the castle, knowing reception wouldn't work past the Great Forest.

He was the only married person in the car. He was the only man with a wife waiting for him at
home. He was the only soon-to-be-father and the only one who'd rather be home at the moment. As Lonnie and Chad bickered back and forth, Ben caught snippets of their conversation. "I'd be a better general than you… I'd make my parents proud."

Everyone wanted to make it gold, prove they were as good as their parents. All Ben was hoping for was that they could end this war quickly, and he could just go home to live in peace for the rest of his life. He wasn't even twenty-five, and he was ready to retire.

When the train stopped a few hours later and everyone deboarded, they were treated to an overall magical sight. A sleigh that looked to be a cross between a snowmobile and a jet fighter, and which was as big as a single train car, was parked beside a dragon which was as long as seven of Ben. The dragon was completely black with ear-like appendages and ridges shaped like dorsal fins down its spine. Its head was flat and two large, pale green eyes stared back into Ben's soul. Above their heads, a short man floated in a cloud of golden sand, which spun and writhed around him like it was a real creature. Strings of golden sand spread out across the forested area, which provided enough light for Ben to see more dragons, an army of tiny, fluttering fairies, a ship that towered above the train they'd just disembarked from, a large man with two large swords and tattoos covering his forearms, what appeared to be a man-sized rabbit with similar tattooing's across his fur, and Jack Frost, who flew above their heads and examined everyone who came out of the train. Ben supposed he was making sure his daughters hadn't come, which they hadn't.

Ben walked towards the man with the swords. "Excuse me." He said and bowed. "I am King Benjamin Florian, and I've come to lead my kingdom alongside yours."

The man with the tattoos laughed. Ben could now see the words 'naughty' and 'nice' printed on the back of his forearms. He set a sword into the ground and outstretched a hand. "Good to meet you, friend." He declared with gusto and a thick Russian accent. "I am Nickolas St, North. You may call me North. We will depart as soon as your trains have unloaded."

From the numerous cars on the train spilled forth hundreds of Auradonians. Ben knew many of them were imagining their stories in books years from now. He knew they were imagining their lives as the opening scenes to a new hero movie.

"How will we transport everyone?" He asked North. "Jack mentioned you had a speedy method to transport."

"Several, actually." North stroked his long, white beard. "It's one of the reasons we knew your country existed, but you didn't know we did."

"Aye, mate." The rabbit agreed, eyeing Ben distastefully. "Watch t'e pros work." He bounced off into the midst of the new Auradonian troops.

"Don't mind Bunny," North told Ben with a smile. "He's always been a bit rough." North's face hardened, and he abruptly looked into the sky. "Jack! Tooth! Hiccup!" He barked. Ben's ears throbbed from the sound.

Jack flew down and landed beside Ben. He brought with him a cold breeze. A hummingbird creature with a human face flitted down and giggled when she looked sideways at Jack. Other mini versions of herself with beaks resembling a hummingbird's appeared beside her. She had pink eyes and beautiful translucent wings. Just when Ben was sure things couldn't get any weirder, a large shadow hurtled towards the ground and landed with a thump. It was another dragon. This one was blue with a tan belly and yellow underneath its wings. It had a much larger, more circular head and many spikes on its tail and head. On its back were two figures. One was a girl with blonde hair neatly kept in a braid over her shoulder. The other was a boy with a prosthetic leg and thick brown
hair. Ben couldn't tell which one of the three newcomers was 'Hiccup', though he had a feeling that the hummingbird girl was 'Tooth' from the way her fairies were darting towards him and peering at his mouth.

Santa, Tooth Fairy, and Easter Bunny. Seemed straightforward enough.

North clapped Ben on the shoulder. "The king has arrived." He told the newcomers.

The girl who'd climbed off the dragon eyed him up and down. "Doesn't look much like a king." She sighed. "I hope this new bunch can at least hold a sword, otherwise we're doomed."

"They can," Ben confirmed. "And more will be arriving soon."

"That's good." The girl gave her male companion a quick kiss on the lips. "Be back soon, babe." She told him. Ben pinched his lips together as the pet name graced his ears. He had to admit that the young man in front of him took it a lot better than he usually did when Mal said it to him.

"Bye Astrid!" He waved as she turned and disappeared into the crowd. Then he turned to Ben. "I'm Hiccup." He introduced.

"Ben." Ben shook his hand.

North laughed. "Well, that wasn't the spiel you gave us before." He commented.

Ben blushed. "I was trying to be formal," he explained.

"Well, don't be," Jack said with a sparkle in his eyes. "We're all friends here." He floated a few feet off the ground and formed a snowball in his palm. This he wielded over his shoulder and threw into the crowd. "Hey Bunny!" He yelled at the top of his register. "Are we ready?"

As an answer, a hole opened up in the center of the crowd and people fell into it, yelling. Ben jumped and stared with wide eyes but North only put a hand on his shoulder. "No panic." He told Jack. "It is only Bunny. He can open tunnels, though he can only do one or two for so far. Now." North clapped his hands together and then pulled two snow globes out of his pocket. He handed one to Jack and one to Tooth before he yelled at the surrounding crowd: "All aboard the Sleigh and the dragons! Sandy, you get the rest!"

The yellow Sandman flashed a thumb's up from down below.

People jumped into the holes in the ground, shouting and screaming all the way. Suddenly, two gigantic portals smashed to the ground and spinning portals appeared. Auradonian soldiers began to stream into them. North clapped a hand on Ben's shoulder. "Go on. Take the portals and hold down the fort. We'll catch up." He pointed to Hiccup. "Let's begin!" He said with a large smile. The two vanished into the night.

Ben looked up at the stars, thought again about Mal, and then approached the portals. He jumped in behind Chad, and the world vanished around him.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Ben VS Tai Lung.
Ben and Mal's anniversary passes, and Mal is struggling. Meanwhile, battle rages north, and Ben is outed to the villains as king.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Not more than a week later, Ben was standing with the other war leaders on a cliffside, staring down at an amassed army of soldiers. They were camped in a deep, dark ravine, and he could hear laughing and jeering. Behind Ben was their army; a mix of Auradonians and Upperlanders who were whispering and trying to figure out what the distraction was.

The Overland was much more varied that Auradon was. Thousands of cliffs and canyons with deep rivers cutting in between them. Jagged mountains towered and cast shadows everywhere and large, deep cracks had opened in the earth. Near the edges of the continents were trees and plant life, but everything in the center of the continent had died off due to the dark clouds that existed above everything. Several scraggly, grey trees existed, but not much else. That made the air harder to breathe here. And that fact was, of course, amplified by the sheer amount of dust everywhere. Fine little black particles like ash that Ben had choked on for a few hours before he learned how to breathe through his teeth. Even now, his mouth tasted like smoke smelled.

"So, what's the plan?" Ben asked as he examined the army below him. It was a little strange to think that the last time he'd been rushing into battle, it had been at Mal's side, at her lead, knowing that if all went wrong, he'd die with his true love at his side. Now, he was alone, and alone was a scary place to be.

"Eh, we could leave 'em alone, but they'd come after us later," Bunny shook his head mournfully. "Take 'em out now and make sure we're safe, but it's a bit sorry to snuff 'em out like that." Ben nodded. He didn't want to take the first shot. If Mal were here, maybe she could erect some sort of barrier to keep the soldiers from being able to leave the canyon.

Jack elbowed him. "What are you thinking about?" He asked.

Ben took in the sight of the army; big, sprawling and broad. He chewed his cheek as he considered what to reply. "I'm thinking about my wife and how quickly we could obliterate this army if she were fighting with me."

Bunny wrinkled his nose. "A noblewoman, fighting in a war?" He questioned.

Jack let out a breathy laugh. "The Queen of Auradon isn't much of a noblewoman," He gasped incredulously. "She dresses in combat boot and can track pranksters from miles away." Ben snorted in agreement and the two rolled their eyes.

"I hope you ver not getting into trouble, Jack?" North frowned, looking down the line of people to examine the guardian of childhood fun.
"Oh, not me," Jack shook his head in denial. "The Princess of Arendelle."

"Yeah, don't underestimate Mal," Ben agreed, drifting off into dreamland a little as he pictured her. "She was an imprisoned Island warrior who ruled an entire generation of children and some adults under the iron grip of fear before my family brought her to Auradon and I made her a queen."

Bunny raised one brow. "What kind of women are you attracted to?" He demanded.

"Strong ones," Ben replied with a little laugh while he straightened his gloves. "And while we're on the subject, if you ever happen to meet Mal, thank her for letting me come here because she's pissed that she has to take care of Auradon while I'm here."

"Yeah, we've got to get you back before she demands our heads," Jack chuckled, fingering his neck nervously as if he could picture Mal making heads roll. Ben laughed.

"So, Bunny began shortly. "Shall we start a different type of war?"

"What's your plan?" Ben repeated his earlier question.

Bunny smirked. "How good are you with a sword?" He asked.

Ben paused, and then a wide grin spread across his face. Maybe he could make this a little fun after all... even if Mal was gone. "I'm decent enough," He shrugged.

"Hold on," Astrid spoke up. She crouched down on the ground, pushing her blonde hair out of the way, and then held a pair of binoculars to her eyes. "Let's see what we're up against," She suggested.

Hiccup crouched down beside her, putting a hand on the small of her back as he looked for an odd sort of collapsible binoculars that Ben had seen him pull out twice. They looked like a bunch of wooden circles and bolts but apparently worked quite well. Hiccup had created them. He held them to his eyes, glanced around down under them, and pointed something out to Astrid. "There," He told her.

Astrid nodded. "See anything else?" She asked.

"No," Hiccup shook his head. "No monsters or anything we don't already know about."

Astrid exhaled in relief. "Thank goodness," She mumbled. "I don't feel like being a Troy victim today."

"Troy?" Ben repeated, leaning over the ridge to examine the crowds. Astrid and Hiccup both seized his sleeves and pulled him down.

"Troy is… some sort of monster," Astrid furrowed her brow. "It's been attacking us for the last five years or so, and we can't figure out what it is. Some monster, a mist, a poison..." She trailed off, biting her lip.

"What does it do?" Ben asked Hiccup, turning to examine the middle-aged man as he folded his binoculars back up with a sigh.

"We're not sure of that either," Hiccup shook his head. "We don't know what it is, what it looks like, or what it does. We only know that it leaves behind the bones of the victims, stripped clean and with the word 'Troy' carved on all of them. We've found villages, lost soldiers… friends…" He bowed his head and exhaled.
"Tai Lung is down there," Astrid announced. "You can see where Hiccup shot him. He's better now, but not perfect."

"Tai Lung is a kung fu master," Hiccup explained. "He's kept us on our toes because he can fight dozens at once and no one can hold a candle to him. The last person who was able to stop him was Po."

"Po?" Ben questioned. "Where is he? They?"

"He," Hiccup confirmed, reaching for his side for a flask of water. He took a long drink as he gathered his thoughts. "Troy," He finished simply with a shrug. "One of the first people we lost."

"Whatever that thing is, it's picking off people far too quickly," Jack Frost shook his head, drifting down by Ben's head. "We were evenly matched for the longest time, and then that atrocity joined their side."

"They have some siege weapons," Astrid announced. "Maybe it'd be best if we snuck down and took those out before." She leaned forward on her hands and then almost fell as the edge of the ridge fell away and about two square feet fell away and went tumbling towards the ground. Bunny cursed as Hiccup and Ben both grabbed Astrid to keep her from falling forward. The rocks hit the bottom of the canyon fall, far below with a clatter and the camp fell silent. Ben pulled Astrid back from the edge and then backed away himself. Astrid was breathing heavy and her face was white. "Sorry!" she gasped.

"They'll be sending scouts up, now," Hiccup sighed. He put his mechanical leg underneath him and got to a standing position. "Let's have our armies spread out. Our goal is to destroy their supplies and take out whoever is necessary. And don't draw out any suffering. We have people whose lives are depending on us."

"Could we use your snowglobes to get down?" Ben asked, furrowing his brow. "Or the tunnels? The dragons?"

"No more snowglobes," Bunny shook his head. "And I can't travel anywhere up here, mate. They mine the ground just for me. As for the dragons--"

"Excuse me," A loud, bigos voice declared from behind everyone. They all turned, making dramatic shushing motions, and Ben narrowed his eyes at Chad Charming, whose hair was messy and combed back. "I can take a squad down to the far west," Chad lowered his voice and continued talking. He pointed down to his right, where the slopes of the hills were smoother and the cliffs significantly shorter in height. "And we can see if we can find a way down into the valley."

"We should send someone to the east too," Astrid nodded, pointing the opposite direction as she brushed her blonde hair out of her face. "They have to know the area better than we do and they have to know how to get up here the fastest. If we send people both ways, we have a better chance of finding a quick route to get down."

"Once we get to the bottom, we can take out the siege weapons and use the dragons to destroy everything else," Hiccup nodded. "But if we try and fly down with the dragons, then they'll shoot us."

"We should have dragon riders stay up here then," North finally spoke up. He put one of his hands of Hiccup's shoulder and the other on Astrid's. "Dis young man may lead some west, and King Ben can take the east."
"I don't want Chad going alone," Ben cut in, narrowing his eyes at his old Swords and Shields teammate. "Bunny, can you tag along with him?"

Bunny nodded and took two long strides to stand beside Chad. No one seemed to think Ben's reaction had been odd. After all, Chad didn't have much experience yet. "Okay," North turned around. Ben crossed his arms and exhaled, tuning out North talking to section leaders and deciding who was going and staying as he examined Chad set his jaw and avoid looking at him pointedly.

He didn't deserve to be a leader. More importantly, he was too prideful and cocky to be a good one. Ben tried to take deep breaths and clear his mind – hopefully not too many people would be hurt because of him. If so, he'd make sure Chad never got to lead anyone again.

Several sections moved out in formation to the east, and Ben took that as his cue to give a brief nod to the other leaders and then move to take control of his group. It wasn't necessarily large – built more for stealth than for defense. Most of the army would be staying on the cliff – after all, the ravine could only hold so many people, and it was easier for the enemy to find large groups.

The cliff they were standing upon was at a high point that sloped up and jutted out. The ground was hard and flat without many places that hid sinkholes or steep drops, but it was hard to transverse the land without being spotted or without slipping off the cliffs. Due to the lack of vegetation, the ground was all slick rock with occasional mosses.

Ben led his group away from the others down into a tiny area like a valley which descended gradually until it opened up onto a ledge about twenty feet below where Hiccup, Astrid, North, and the army remained. Jack Frost had, it seemed, taken up the role of a scout, darting among the shadows and flitting out of sight for long periods as he tried to watch the camp below for enemy scouts. They plunged forward into the darkness and had to move slower as the shadows grew more intense. Ben couldn't even see the sword sheathed at his side, much less any enemy scouts or the cliffsides they were supposed to be avoiding. Slowly, his vision came around to assist him, and then he could vaguely see the grooves in the cliff walls as they passed.

The ravines were narrow and with mostly smooth walls, as if someone had cut them out rather than the earth splitting apart. Like some gigantic creature with long nails had clawed through the earth back when it had been soft and left these behind. Ben led his crew down a narrow ledge and then silently gestured to a different incline that had risen enough underneath them to be swung down to. Carefully, one by one, the squad, which was about fifty in number besides him, jumped down. The ledge they landed on was much wider and about halfway down from the high point and the bottom of the ravine. They continued on.

About an hour later, they hit the bottom. It was mostly covered with some sort of creeping moss that lined the walls and edges of the ravine but only ascended upwards a few feet. A soft squelching sound could be heard as a couple of the older soldiers stepped on it. Ben examined the area and looked up. He couldn't see anyone up above him but knew they must be there. To call for even more silence than there already was, Ben raised a hand into the air. Everyone stilled. He listened carefully, but there was nothing. Not even a wind. Carefully, he took a step forward.

"Ben!" Someone whisper-called from above him. Ben almost jumped out of his skin as he whirled around, gasping, and stared at Jack Frost, who had decided to hover above him.

"Oh, don't scare me like that!" Ben demanded in a low tone, holding a hand to his throat as he tried to keep from gasping for breath.

"That's my specialty," Jack chuckled, laughing. His voice, too, was low. The canyon didn't seem to echo, but that didn't mean they wanted their voices to carry. "I'm sorry, Ben. I've been out scouting.
It looks like they sent scouts towards Chad's side, but not to yours. He's already going around them."

Ben frowned. He might not have been involved with war plans for very long now, but he was pretty sure that wasn't how things were supposed to work. "Why would they assume one side is safe but not the other?" He asked.

Jack shrugged. "I think they think this side is naturally impenetrable," He decided. "But, uh, you should still be careful. We don't want to attract any more attention."

Ben stared at him. Sure, climbing down hadn't exactly been like taking a walk around the palace with Mal, but it hadn't been that hard. Could it be that they thought it was naturally impenetrable because they hadn't been here long and hadn't investigated properly? But then why would they risk not searching this side? "Something has to be up," He whispered. "Thank you for telling me, Jack."

Jack Frost nodded and took to the sky again, quickly disappearing.

Ben turned back to his group. "Come closer," he invited, gesturing them all forward. "Apparently they haven't sent scouts this way. Something about that doesn't sit right with me. You all can branch out as we move but stay where you can see at least one other person. I don't want any accidents with any of you." People nodded in agreement. Most of them were northerners who had lived through the war, but some were the still-fresh Auradonians.

As they spread out, they came across several tall stone structures that looked like stalagmites without any ceiling to speak of. Ben glared at them. They were about twice as tall as he and half as thick but angle them right and they could likely hide something or someone behind them. He turned over his shoulder and whispered: "Go slowly," to the men over his shoulder.

Slowly, they all crept in. That stupid loose silt that seemed to be everywhere coated about two inches of the ground here. As they walked, it filtered up into the air like a mist that stuck to literally everything. Ben put a hand on his sword hilt as they tread through the figures quietly. A warning was burning into his fingertips.

Some of the soldiers started to creep ahead of him as he stopped to squint at the seemingly magnetic silt that was coating his legs. How could this stuff be everywhere all at once? In the air, in the water… what was it? And even more curious, something about it almost seemed… familiar.

He stepped forward into a mostly clear area and paused, watching everyone continue to slide forward without a sound. He squinted. Things were… too quiet. He turned and look all around, and then watched one of the soldiers continue moving forward. Ben saw a shadow jump horizontally out of the corner of his eye and the man disappeared. "There!" He shouted, cold blood rushing through his ears as he unsheathed his sword with a grinding of metal. Around him, all the other soldiers unsheathed their weapons as the yells of the attacked soldier echoed off the canyon walls. Then all fell silent, and Ben watched an abnormally tall figure appear out of the dusty haze.

He stood tall, about three feet higher than Ben, and he was older. Black cloth pants and a metal-studded leather belt and a bare chest with many old wounds and scars covering him. On his shoulder was a white bandage, clearly covering a slightly more recent wound. This didn't do much to set Ben at ease, however, as the creature seemed to move without much problem at all. It was… an animal. An animal with long, devilish teeth and a slatted cat-like gaze and long claws protruding from only four fingers on either paw. Several soldiers took gasps and he saw fear cross over their faces. "Tai Lung…" One trembled.

Ben held his sword aloft and carefully braced his body into his accustomed stance. The bandage had given away who the opponent was, but he had no idea what this monster's fighting style was.
If he had to guess, it would be bloody, brutal, and cold-hearted.

So, this was why no scouts had gone out. They’d sent the monster himself.

A growl arose from Tai Lung’s throat and Ben pinched his lips together. "Everyone," he commanded, "I want you to get behind me."

The growl in Tai Lung’s throat stopped and restarted like a laugh without any change of breath. Ben readied his sword behind his shoulder.

Tai Lung attacked. He pounced forward, shifting all his weight to his hands and crashed down on Ben as he did. Ben was knocked to the ground and his head slammed into the rock. Blood filled his mouth. He could hear a voice that sounded suspiciously like Mal's chanting "Don't drop your sword, don't drop your sword." He kicked upwards and it was like kicking a rock – his knee to Tai Lung’s iron stomach did nothing to deter the fighting machine. He seized a fistful of Tai Lung's hair and rolled, but Tai Lung kept up the roll and slammed him back into the ground, this time on the arm that wasn't still holding his sword. A terrible feeling like pins and needles ran up his arm. He faked slamming the cutting edge of his blade into the monster and Tai Lung leaped back a little, allowing Ben to push his feet underneath him and jump to a standing position. Tai Lung didn't let him stay there though. His foot spun out in a roundhouse kick that sent Ben soaring into one of the stone structures. His side took the blow with a sickening crunch. Tai Lung followed him. Ben watched his hands secure at his side before the monster took another kick and Ben barely had the good sense to duck before Tai Lung's foot smashed into the rock and the structure cracked.

He attacked with his foot. How fascinating. He preferred to kick over anything else.

Forget backstabbing – Ben was going to shove his sword through the creature's foot.

He ducked under Tai Lung's next kick and then maneuvered around his back. Tai Lung jumped vertically and dragged his claws across Ben's arm. Only three out of the four claws got him. They left long gashes in his armor and scratches in his skin. Ben jumped back and watched Tai Lung continue to advance. He attacked more with his right foot than his left. A very subtle dominance.

Once, long ago, his father had criticized him for doing the very same thing in his own fighting style. "Don't always swing towards the left, Ben," he admonished. "Someone is going to watch your blow pass them and then attack before you can draw back." Now, he was about to do the same thing to Tai Lung.

Tai Lung kicked him in the chest and sent him flying back into another rock, which Ben ducked around and circled to the back, despite the fact his chest felt like an elephant had stomped on it. Come to think of it, hadn't he almost been stomped on by Aziz's elephant when he was sparring with the Agrabahan Prince once? Tai Lung punched the rock and Ben watched it crumble to the ground. How was this creature so strong?

Tai Lung advanced evenly, took a left swing, balanced back on his left foot for half of a nanosecond, and then raised his right leg to swing. In that same instance, Ben raised his sword, and the sharp blade sliced a deep gash into Tai Lung’s leg. Tai Lung howled and pulled his foot back, giving Ben plenty of clearance to raise his blade and plunge it toward Tai Lung's foot. The tip of the blade entered his ankle and kept going, appearing out of his heel instead. Tai Lung howled.

Ben kicked him back and watched him stumble a little. Despite the fact that both feet were wounded, he continued standing, though his face twisted up in pain.
As Tai Lung hissed at both his injuries and at Ben, Ben quickly assessed his own injuries. Blood was leaking through his hair, presumably from where he'd been slammed into the ground, and one of his arms still felt a little numb and dead. He couldn't straighten out his side, but he could walk.

"Here, kitty, kitty," Ben mumbled under his breath. Tai Lung hissed. Ben raised his blade again. The monster flew forward, not jumping around as much but with unbridled fury. Ben began deflecting the leopard's swipes with his sword. Tai Lung was able to defend his swipes with his claws, which might as well have been made of steel. With every collision, sparks flew. Ben started making his swipes wider, to force Tai Lung to block more of himself, and began forcing him to move backward. It had the unfortunate effect of making his movements a little slower, but Tai Lung was slowly tiring, and being forced to move back on his hurt foot was dissolving his confidence even more.

Tai Lung raised his hand back and Ben swung his sword. A horrible scratch filled his eardrums before he heard a sound like the snap of metal. He looked up in horror at his sword, but it was fine. Instead, Tai Lung howled as he yanked his hand back to himself. The claw had snapped clean off and blood was trickling from the small yet painful wound. Tai Lung was suffering the pains of a broken nail. A nail Ben had sliced off.

Ben kicked him down and raised his sword above his head. Then, he paused. He'd never killed anyone before. He didn't think he'd even killed any thing before. He was the boy who winced in sympathy when kids like Chad burned ants with magnifying glasses. He was the child who had to sit in the classroom for dissections because he felt so bad for the small animals. Could he really kill Tai Lung?

Tai Lung growled and, with his good hand, swiped at Ben's leg. Ben gasped and jumped back, barely getting away with a few return scratches of his own, and then a blast of ice came from above. Jack Frost landed with his expression grey and panicked as he quickly encased Tai Lung in thick ice sheets. "Oh, man in the moon!" He exclaimed. "Are you okay? How did – how did you fight him off?"

Ben slumped against one of the rock structures, clutching his leg as he took a long, deep breath. His head was spinning. "Ugh," He groaned. "He… liked to attack with his right leg."

"Dude…" One of the Overlanders exhaled, staring at him with wide eyes. "Where'd you learn to do that? Does everyone in Auradon fight like that?"

Ben shook his head, which made things worse, and then continued gasping for breath. "No," He denied. "I just like swords. You should see… my wife." He leaned his head back against the rock and closed his eyes.

"Water?" A voice asked, stepping through the dust, which became much less floaty and sticky in the presence of ice. It was Lonnie, who Ben hadn't even known had been in his group. She was offering a canteen with Mushu, her mom's guardian, pictured on the side.

"Here," Jack offered, outstretching his hand. "I can chill it so that it does more."

Lonnie passed the canteen to Jack, who passed it back to Ben. As Ben's fingers wrapped around the chilled metal, he noted how the condensation almost made the stupid silt feel… normal. He frowned. "Lonnie," he rasped. "Can you take over leading everyone? I can keep up, but it'll be better to have someone who is more alert and you are a general."

Lonnie nodded eagerly. "Yeah," she agreed. "By the way, that was awesome. You're even better than you were back in High School."
"Yeah, you took out Tai Lung," Jack exhaled, staring at the frozen leopard. "I've never seen anything like it."

"I didn't take him out," Ben shook his head. "I couldn't kill him."

Jack shook his head. "I can't ever either," He whispered. "I get too guilty. Almost none of us can. It's one of the reasons we started losing. All of us are fighters, but none of us are killers."

They needed a solution. Somewhere they could keep their enemies easily contained so they wouldn't have to kill them but also so they couldn't get out.

Ben took a swig from the canteen and then slowly got to his feet. Lonnie and Jack both hissed cautiously as he put weight on his leg, noting that the bleeding had mostly stopped. He shook his hand at them. "It's not as bad as it looks," He assured them. "My head will need to be looked at when we get back, but that's it."

"I don't know if you should be fighting," Jack shook his head. "You just took down one of the most dangerous villains we have with a sword, quick thinking, and a lot of endurance."

"Well, that's okay," Lonnie said with a bright smile. "Look!" She pointed above their heads and everyone followed her gesture. Everyone could see Astrid's bright blue dragon diving down, followed by Hiccup's dark shadow of a beast. The dragons were soaring down. Chad's army must have made it to the siege weapons.

Lonnie rested a hand on Ben's leg. "You stay here," She directed. "I was trained by my parents to lead people in battle anyway, and I'm your general. I'll take over and I'll make sure everyone comes back safe. You rest up so we can make sure you can get home in one fairly undamaged piece."

Ben considered her words and nodded. "Alright," He agreed, and then his gaze flicked over to where Tai Lung had first appeared from. "Can someone look at that soldier who fell? He might still be alive…"

Lonnie's expression twisted in doubt. She turned around and nodded to one of the other soldiers, who moved out of formation and went to search for the body of the fallen man. When he found him, he looked back over with a disheartened look and shook his head. Ben bowed his head in shame.

"It's not your fault, Ben," Lonnie whispered, setting a hand on his shoulder. "Remember, there were people Mal couldn't save either."

It didn't help. It didn't ease the pain that someone had died under his watch. He squeezed his eyes closed. "Auradon or Overlander?" He asked.

"Overlander," the soldier who had walked over called. "He's probably with the rest of his family now. May his soul find his rest."

The other Overlanders repeated the wish: "May his soul find his rest." Ben got the feeling it was the Northern equivalent of 'Rest in Peace'.

"Let's move out," Lonnie decided, raising her hand above her head. "Everyone, follow me!" The remaining soldiers fell into formation and then followed Lonnie away, marching in synchrony. Ben watched them go without a word. Jack hovered close to Ben's head, careful not to touch the open wound.
"Mal is going to kill us," He whispered.

Ben snorted. "Nah. She'll just ask why I waited to use the sword." He examined the blade, still clutched in his grasp, and then slowly bid his fingers loosen so he could sheath the blade back. "She's not going to expect you to watch over me."

"I just… know from experience that women with magic are scary when they're mad." Jack winced. "And Mal… I've heard the rumors about that Isle battle you had. Didn't she turn into a dragon?"

"No, that was her mom," Ben shook his head. "I don't think Mal can turn into a dragon." He took another drink and then pressed his hands to his eyes. Jack's hair was making his head hammer. Jack pressed on his shoulder and pushed him back to the ground.

"Sit down," he whispered. "I'll call a dragon to take you up."

"Ben is calling," Sophia told Mal the moment she got off the phone with Evelyn from the Isle. They'd just gotten cell service to work. Mal had scarcely put her phone down when the words jumped out of Sophia's mouth.

Mal perked up. "Really?" she asked as she shuffled financial reports off her desk and scanned a letter from an Auradon girl into her computer. "You're not just saying that to get me worked up, are you?"

"Belle and Adam are already up in your room," Sophia assured her with a smile. "You'd better hurry. It is your anniversary, after all."

It was. And it had been the longest, loneliest day of Mal's life. She'd woken up, alone. Gone to the Isle for a few hours and come back, still alone. Now here she was, stuck in her office, fooling herself that every person who walked past was Ben, and she was still so, so alone. Mal jumped up out of her chair and sprinted to the door. She paused to give Sophia a giant hug before she raced out of her office and down the corridor.

It'd been almost two weeks since Ben had left. He'd called twice using the giant stone basin Mal had gifted him over Christmas. Mal had shrunk it down for him so it was more portable and lighter to hold, so he'd taken it with him as an alternative to long-distance letters that Bunny or Jack would periodically carry back for all the soldiers.

Mal dashed into her bedroom, out of breath, and hurried into the bathroom. King Adam and Queen Belle were looking down into the sink, where a small image of Ben, about the size of a hand with the fingers spread wide, stared up at them. The moment Ben saw Mal, his face broke into a smile. "There's my girl." He said. "I miss you."

"Miss you too," Mal said through a smile as Belle and Adam made room for her to stand in front of the basin. Belle's hand rested on her daughter-in-law's back. "Happy anniversary!"

"Happy anniversary," Ben returned. His eyes were bright and emanated happiness, even through the water.

Adam pulled Mal under his large, heavy arm. "How is it going up there?" He asked.

"We're still not seeing a large change." Ben shrugged. "Small ones, for sure, but not the giant movement we're hoping for. I did manage to get one of their big hitters. Pitch Black has this army"
of dark stallions and Eris has gigantic monsters, like the sea monster we saw, that she sends at us from all over. We have a battle planned for tonight at an area they called Bergen Town before it was overrun by the villains." Ben grimaced. "Chad is leading this one since it was kind of his idea. We'll see how it goes."

"Have you been hurt at all?" Belle asked.

"Just bruises and scrapes," Ben assured her. "Tai Lung banged me up a little and I got cut on my knee when I fell last battle but that's been the worst of it."

"How many battles have you been in?" Mal studied Ben's face. He had dirt smudged all along his hairline. He looked almost like a villain kid, except he was smiling and happy.

"Two," Ben answered. "And I led part of one. We're on the West side of the continent, and everything here is just rock and cliffs and this stupid sticky dust that is in the air everywhere."

Belle tapped Adam's shoulder. "We can talk to him later." She told him. "It's their anniversary and he's away. Let's let them talk."

The two stood up and embraced Mal. Adam squeezed her shoulder with a smile. Belle kissed her cheek. "Goodbye Ben!" Belle waved to her son.

"Bye, mom!" Ben waved back, though it momentarily covered his face from view. Adam closed the door behind him and Belle and Mal pulled up a wooden stool that had been left in the bathroom for this purpose.

"You look nice," Ben told her. Mal smiled and brushed her straightened hair behind her ear. Now that the days were growing shorter and darker, it was starting to go dark again. And some streaks even had blue growing in, which was weird since she'd never had blue hair before. "Are you seeing anyone tonight?" He asked.

"Sorta," Mal answered. "I'm expecting a call from this ruggedly handsome man, who's away serving at war for his country."

Ben smirked. "Sounds like a catch." He told her.

Mal nodded. "You should see the way his eyes light up when he smiles." She sighed.

Ben laughed and smiled so wide Mal could see all of his front teeth for a few seconds. "I hope you have a nice time with him." He laughed.

"I always do." Mal smiled and shrugged, running her fingers around the perimeter of the bowl. "Wish he was here with me, though."

"I wish that too," Ben whispered into the water. He ran his fingers through his hair, which was a little greasy. Mal could tell he'd tried to wash off most of the grime for this call though, and she appreciated the gesture more than she could express, even if she herself was more of a mud and dirt person. She reached out and brushed the water with her fingertips. Ben's image rippled but did not fade. It only faded when she threw earth into the image. Ben cleared his throat and drew her attention back to him. "How are you feeling? It's still too early for you to be sick, right?"

Mal frowned and drew an arm around her stomach. Of course he'd want to talk about the baby. She still wasn't sure what to think about it. "I'm not sick." She told him. "But I've mostly been ignoring it. I don't want to think too much about it."
Ben stared at her silently. She could see a million and one thoughts cross his mind and could guess only a few. 'She's upset', 'I need to be there', and 'Is she okay' were the thoughts she could guess him thinking right off the bat. She swallowed. "I'm proud of you." She told him honestly. "I miss you, but I'm glad you're up there helping everyone." The tips of Mal's fingers were tingling with magic she desperately wanted to use.

Ben looked away and shook his head. "What are your plans for tonight?" He asked.

"I've been looking forward to you calling all day," Mal admitted. "I'm not worried about much else, now. Auradon released a couple of news stories reflecting over our first year that I want to read. But there's nothing else to look forward to now. I guess I'll finish work and eat dinner alone." Ben winced and looked sad. "And watch Big Hero Six without you here." Mal continued to tease.

Ben's mouth dropped open. "But that's my favorite movie!" He declared. "You're going to watch it without me?"

"Personally, I like the Incredibles 2." Mal shrugged. "Especially the part where she's reaching up the backside of the door and undoing the locks? It's awesome!"

"Baymax can fly." Ben insisted stubbornly.

"So can I. And Elastigirl." Mal rolled her eyes.

"Baymax heals everyone and acts drunk when his battery is low." Ben pursed his lips.

Mal shook her head. "Elastigirl knows where her son's shoes are when she was in a new house for one night tops and caused an entire political movement."

Ben rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay, anyways. Remember how I said I had a thing for our anniversary?"

"I remember." Mal nodded. "I have a thing too, but it's stuck here with me. Can I wait to show you?" She, Evie, and Carlos had made him a collection of accessories she knew he used regularly - a watch, cuff links, tie-pins, and a couple of other things - but they were all themed around him and her. Little pictures, a beast and a dragon, and other little things she knew only he would notice.

"That's fine, but I want to give you mine right now." Ben disappeared from view for a few seconds.

Mal stuck her finger in the water and drew small circles on the surface. "Unless it's a surprise home-coming or a long-distance kiss, I'll still be a little sad, hun," She mumbled.

"You say that now, but I think you'll like it." Ben laughed. He set the basin down at his feet. Mal looked down and saw he was sitting on a log with the strap of a wooden guitar over his shoulder. Mal's mouth dropped open.

"You play guitar?" She asked incredulously. She couldn't believe she hadn't known this.

"Mal, it's Auradon." Ben rolled his eyes. "Every kid plays at least one instrument, and I chose the guitar when I was a teen." He plucked a few chords and tuned it before he looked back down at her and smiled. Mal was immediately touched.

"You're going to play me a song?" She asked with a smile.

"-that I wrote," Ben added. He winked at her and then looked down at the chords on the guitar. Mal touched a hand to her heart and smiled.
Ben strummed a few chords to test it and then looked back up at her with a smile. He started out strumming a few chords before he started singing.

"Did I mention… that I'm in love with you? And did I mention… there's nothing I can't do? And did I happen to say… I dream of you every day? But let me shout it out loud if that's okay... if that's okay." He smiled down and up at her with a goofy smile. Mal smiled and set her chin on her fists as she listened to him.

"I met this girl that rocked my world like it's never been rocked. Now I'm living just for her and I won't ever stop. I never thought that it could happen to a guy like me, but now look at what you've done; you've got me down on my knees." Mal raised a skeptical brow at the 'I never thought that it could happen to me' line but chuckled at his giddy tune. He continued with a growing smile. "Because my love for you is ridiculous. I never knew… that it could be like this. My love for you is ridiculous. My love is R-I-D-I-C-U-L-O-U-S. It's… just… ridiculous and I would give my whole kingdom for just one kiss."

Mal's eyebrows shot an inch up her face as she gave Ben a stern look. Ben smiled and continued singing. "But did I mention that I'm in love with you? And did I mention… there's nothing I can't do. But did I happen to say I dream of you every day? But let me shout it out loud if that's okay. I've got to know which way to go, come on give me a sign. You've got to show me that you're only ever gonna be mine. Don't want to go another minute with or without you, cause if your heart just isn't in it, I don't know what I'll do."

Mal listened to Ben sing and smiled as she considered his words. She didn't agree with everything, like that 'kingdom for a kiss' line, but it was still a nice touch. She folded her arms and laid her chin on the counter as she continued to smile at her war-bound husband.

Ben finished his song with a smile and pulled the guitar strap over his head. He set the instrument aside and picked up the stone basin again. "Did you like it?" He asked with a nervous smile.

"You're not allowed to give away your kingdom for a kiss," Mal told him. "I forbid it."

Ben laughed. "Noted." He agreed. "Anything else?"

"What do you mean you never thought it could happen to a guy like you?" Mal asked, furrowing her brow. "You sing, you're the ruler of Auradon, you're super nice and caring, and you know how to make snowflakes. What girl wouldn't want you?"

Ben's smile faded and he looked past the basin at the ground. "Well, I know that people – girls – like me, but I kind of figured, growing up, that the age of true love was over, and I wouldn't find someone I would truly – you know, love."

Mal sat up and frowned at him. "I thought you believed in happy endings?" She asked.

"Oh, I do." Ben nodded in affirmation. "I just didn't think mine would involve anything more than being dutiful to my kingdom and faithful to whoever I eventually ended up with. Not a life of love, just one of purpose."

Mal blanched. "You'd have been so… stifled." She dropped off, wrinkling her nose at the frankly disheartening images coming to mind.

Ben chuckled and nodded. "Yeah, I would have been." He agreed. "I'm glad I get the chance to know you."

Mal cocked her head at an angle and thought for a few seconds. "My life would suck without you."
She said after a few seconds. Ben burst into laughter. "I'm serious!" Mal said. "I mean, I wouldn't be married, wouldn't live in the palace, wouldn't go to the moors every month, wouldn't be the queen of anything, wouldn't be in Auradon, wouldn't know Belle, Sophia, Stewart, Adam, or Audrey. I probably would still live with mom and I might not have a little sister since Mom probably had her to replace me anyway."

"Hey, I didn't say anything." Ben held up his hands in defense. "My life would suck without you too. It'd be pretty... ridiculous." Mal rolled her eyes as Ben chortled. "How is Auradon and the Isle? Are they doing okay?"

"Uh, yeah." Mal nodded. "Belle and Adam and I are jointly running the kingdom, we got cell service to the Isle and people are placing private orders for phones now, and we've paid Auradon back 25% in the first two months of repayment."

Ben's eyebrows shot up. "Wow." He said. "I knew you'd pay Auradon back, but I didn't think it'd be this quickly."

"Just you watch," Mal said seriously. "One day, Auradon will be in debt to the Isle. We're harder workers than you are."

Ben snorted. "Sure, okay Mal." He scoffed, clearly not believing her. "And you're sure you're okay?"

Mal hesitated and swallowed. "Yeah," She agreed. "I'm okay." Underneath the counter, she squeezed a hand to her stomach like she was going to be sick. She suddenly felt like she was spiraling into a black hole.

Ben nodded. "Okay." He nodded. Someone called his name in the distance. Ben looked away and sighed. "We're starting drills. Talk to you later?" He asked.

"Be safe." Mal nodded. She blew him a kiss, and he pretended to catch it, which made her smile. Then he winked and vanished out of sight. The moment his image faded, Mal slumped forward against the counter. "Oh!" She gasped for breath, clawing a little at her midsection and leaning her forehead against the cool countertop in a blind panic.

The door to the living area opened and a woman with black hair slipped inside and put her hands on Mal's shoulders as Mal's eyes filled with tears that she didn't understand where they were coming from. "Oh, Sophia!" She gasped, wiping at her eyes with one hand while digging the knuckles of her other one underneath her ribcage. "Sophia, what do I do? What should I have said?"

Sophia wrapped her arms around Mal and carefully pulled her hands away. "It's gonna be okay." She murmured. "Give it time, it won't hurt anymore."

It was all Mal could do as she choked back her sobs and let the silent tears stream down her face. She leaned into Sophia's grasp and shook her head. "I don't want this." She admitted, finally. "I don't think I can do this. I'm just not ready."

Sophia began to rub little circle into Mal's shoulder blades and turned her around so Mal could bury her face in her shoulder. And in the quiet, there were only two more words exchanged. The whisper: "I know," fell on open ears, tear spots and tiled floors.

"That Mal?" Jack Frost asked as Ben dumped the water out of the basin and into the dirt. The contact with anything earthly made the connection fizzle.

"Yeah." Ben nodded as he carefully stowed the basin in his jacket, in a pocket underneath the seam
that made it look like he had an orange stuffed into his coat. "It's our anniversary."

"Oh." Jack frowned. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Ben shrugged. "You do what you have to do. I mean, you probably know that better than anyone." He shoved his hands into his pockets and scuffed the ground with his shoes.

Jack flinched and quickly glanced about the area. Soldiers stood around, but no one was obviously eavesdropping. "Yeah," Jack whispered. "I guess I do."

Ben stood up and began to follow Jack away. He took the guitar, which had been loaned to him by one of the Vikings from the town of Berk, hoping to find its owner along the way. "What's going on?" He asked Jack.

"We're going to meet with Queen Poppy and King Branch," Jack explained. "They lived outside of Bergen Town and performed a type of… undercover raid about twenty years ago."

"Okay." Ben nodded. "Are we flying?"

Jack pointed to himself. "I am flying. You are taking the Easter tunnels. Sorry, your highness, but you're too heavy for me."

Ben laughed. "Not a problem." He shrugged. "But... aren't they mined?"

"The area we're going to has never fallen into enemy hands. Unless something awful happened without our knowledge, you'll be perfectly safe, your majesty." Jack stuffed his hands into his hoodie and didn't say anything else. Ben bit his cheek.

"When was the last time you spoke to Elsa?" He whispered.

"One of the meetings before we left." Jack sighed.

Ben pulled a face. "Do you mean when you said: 'with all due respect your highness, I think it best if-'"

"Yeah," Jack said shortly, scuffing his feet against the ground.

Ben blinked. "Oh." He breathed. "You must miss her."

"Miss who?" Someone with a gruff Australian accent asked. Ben looked up and found the six-foot-tall Easter rabbit standing directly in his path. His mouth dropped open for a second as he considered his response.

"My sister," Jack replied without hesitation. "Ben was asking how you become a spirit." He glanced sharply to Ben to make sure the king had gotten the message.

Bunny immediately winced and shook his head. "Not fun," He admitted then shook his head. "Ready to go?" He asked Ben.

Ben shrugged and nodded. He braced himself as Bunny tapped the ground twice. A hole opened underneath his feet and Ben accidentally bit his tongue as he tried to stifle a shout. He tasted blood and then was falling through the earth like he was being suctioned through a vacuum tube. Ben was suddenly thrown into the air as the tunnel came to an abrupt end. He landed on his back, breathing hard as he tried to come to his senses. Someone laughed, and another someone grumbled. "Very kingly." They muttered.
A pale hand appeared in his face. "Come on, get up." Jack rolled his eyes, already there. "I don't like the tunnels much either." He whispered.

The ground to Ben's left sprang open as he got to his feet with Jack's help. Bunnymund leaped straight into the air, and the ground rematerialized underneath his feet. A poppy rested in the ground directly underneath his feet. Ben stared skeptically as Bunny landed on his feet. "Showoff." He sighed.

"I'm sure it's not as easy as he makes it look." A female's voice said. Ben looked to the ground and saw two personages a few feet from his left foot. One was bright pink, and the other was bright blue. They were both about the length of Ben's wrist to his forearm, like a huggable toy. They had long, poofy hair atop their heads that stood straight up and bright, sparkly eyes and cheeks. The blue one folded his arms imposingly, but the pink one smiled as she examined the newcomers. "Welcome to the troll tree!" She exclaimed.

The only reason the trolls had survived thus far was because of their superhuman capability to be insanely happy all the time, Ben soon discovered. They were not a war-faring community and only the blue troll, whose name was Branch, knew anything about combat. Pitch Black and Eris, who headed the villains, had a hard time sneaking their fear and chaos into the Troll Paradise since Branch kept everything so orderly and Queen Poppy kept everything so exciting all the time. Not to mention the natural impenetrability of the area and the large defenses Branch had somehow managed to rig around the insanely happy community. Just being near the trolls helped cheer Ben up about his situation as a whole. Mal was holding down the kingdom, he wouldn't be away forever, and things would work out just fine.

King Branch and Queen Poppy had seven children together, all of varying colors and shades. None were above the age of eight. Troll children grew in pods on the troll tree that were covered with bits of their parent's hair. Ben wasn't entirely sure how their forever-extendable hair was possible, but as far as he could tell it grew out to be five feet longer than their bodies and could be retracted back at will.

King Branch went straight to work explaining the logistics of Bergen Town, their larger, next-door companions which Eris and Pitch had seized months ago. The blue troll was the least randomly happy of all the trolls. He was serious and smart, but still pleasant to work with. Ben related to him most of all. Meanwhile, he got a kick out of imagining Mal and Queen Poppy trying to get along. His own colorful-haired bride would have found everything too bright and annoying.

"Eris is rarely present in Bergen Town, and Pitch Black is on the other side of the country." Branch explained as he stood atop a map three times his size. "She usually takes up a garrison in Syracuse, right down here." Branch tapped a section of the map about five inches from where Poppy was doodling on the troll tree with sparkly green and pink markers. Ben could see rainbow stickers and glitter if he craned his neck. "That's where Eris's original story starts. Sinbad, her old nemesis, has been patrolling down by the sea of monsters to keep them away from Auradon, but his partner Proteus, who is a decent swordsman himself, has been fighting against her and trying to take his kingdom back."

"We'll open portals directly into the square here. There're prisoners there. Cavemen, some of the senior Vikings who still remember the dragon fighting days, basically a brunt-force army there." Branch explained as he pulled a smaller, much more detailed map of a small city over the larger one. "We don't need to take Bergen Town, but we need to seize the Book of Peace, which is being kept in the old castle. If we can seize that, it'll weaken Eris's power in Syracuse and we might be able to drive her off the west coast."
"Might," Ben whispered.

Bunny looked at the young king. "Aye, no offense mate, but your troops are completely fresh. Most of them are just barely learning to hold rank."

"Let's go freestyle," Jack suggested. "Eris already has. We'll be sitting ducks if we hold rank."

"They'll be more used to going on their own." Ben agreed. "They've been taught all their lives they have to make their own story."

"Aye, bloody bunch of idiots." Bunny rolled his eyes. "Don't they know war takes no prisoners?"

Ben shrugged. Bunny turned and suddenly jabbed him in the shoulder. "Good on you for not being like them." He told Ben. "You got a head on your shoulders. Good thing you're king."

"Okay," Jack called everyone to attention. "Let's get down to business." Ben didn't say anything as they turned back to their plans. They turned back to the map and began to pour over it, devising a battle strategy that was unlike any Ben had ever heard of in any history class.

Late that night, Ben strapped on his Auradon-manufactured armor and carefully covered most of his face with black paint. One thing he didn't know, as a ruler and as a war general, is that no plan is executed perfectly. Something outside the variables you've considered always happens. It wouldn't be long before he learned.

They fell into ranks of twelve and fifty. Ben, being King, had been placed at the head of a battalion of fifty, as had Chad Charming. The other leaders had caught on to the fact Ben wasn't very impressed with Chad, but he had successfully managed to lead his last squad to disarm the siege weapons while Ben had fought Tai Lung, so they allowed Chad a small leadership role. Bunny had a smaller squad of his own, and North headed the third battalion. Other people, including Astrid and Lonnie, who were the only female leaders, headed the smaller squads. The Tooth Fairy commonly sent the tiny versions of herself to aid in battle but was too jittery to be of much help herself.

Ben managed to, by sheer volume and luck, gather all the troops in to give them a last-minute pep talk speech and run them through a few small drills. Since they'd first arrived, they'd improved by leaps and bounds, but they were still young, inexperienced, and new to war. Just like Ben. All were under the age of twenty-eight and had never seen war in their lives. They'd never known more than the history classes they'd ignored anyways.

North appeared, lumbering over with a tight expression as he fished for something in his bag. He pulled out a large, round, spherical ball of glass. "The last one," He grumbled, and then stopped in front of Ben's group. Ben nodded slowly with a sigh. North shook the globe. "Bergan Town, square three," He announced. Ben watched the scene inside go from a Christmas tree and a warm hearth to a dark and dank mist of fog. North hurled the globe to the ground, and a portal appeared. With a deep breath, Ben began leading everyone forward. As he passed, North clapped him on the shoulder, almost hard enough to make Ben collapse to the ground. "Good luck," North said.

The portal felt like thousands of snowflakes stabbing him all over his body. It felt like he was stuck in a vacuum chamber with tiny icicles flying every direction. Then suddenly he was being forced forward. He stumbled a few feet and kept moving as the battalion followed him out. When all fifty had made it out, Ben began to move.

It had been Bunny's job to infiltrate the palace for the book of peace and everyone else's to collect
the prisoners. As other people appeared on the square amid shouts and the occasional awkward war cry, Ben lead his group down the street.

Bergen town had once been populated by what was described as the saddest, most miserable creatures that had ever lived. Their only source of happiness had been to eat the trolls of what was now King Branch's and Queen Poppy's kingdom. Obviously, this made for bad relationships until the trolls had left. Twenty years later, some had been captured, and Queen Poppy and King Branch had traveled back to rescue them in what Ben guessed was their fairy tale. They'd managed to cure the Bergens of the generational sadness and it had remained that way until Eris had snuck in with the shadows. The Bergens had feared becoming sad again, and so they were easy targets for Pitch Black. As Eris caused their community the crumble from the top down by murdering Former King Gristle and Queen Bridget, the Bergens had quickly fallen slaves to despair.

Now, most of the Bergens were gone. For some, the fear and chaos had crept into their heads until they'd ended their lives themselves. For others, they'd disappeared one by one for their bones to be discovered by others. On almost of the bones was written the word: 'Troy'.

It was odd that such a name was being left behind, Ben thought. In Auradon, there was a legend from Olympus about a place called Troy. Troy had been a city with immensely impressive walls at war with someone else. The other army left a giant horse outside as a sacrifice to a god and told them: Don't take this. It's not for you. The Trojans were like: Screw you. They took it into the city, unaware the other team's army was hiding inside. The army waited until everyone was asleep and massacred everyone and burnt the city to the ground.


Ben's division crept down the street. Everything was deserted. Estimates stated that a small fraction of the original population may have been allowed to stay behind, but if they were, Ben couldn't tell.

Ben lead his group to the back entrance of the prison. The place was eerie. It was too dark to see anything. Even if the sun had been out, thick mists covered the deserted city and blocked out all the light. The palace was topped with the occasional partially-melted iron sculpture. Rolls of barbed wire were lying there and there as Ben took his sword and jammed it at an angle under the doorway. With a little bit of prodding and shoving, the handle popped clean off. Ben severed the inside mechanisms and the door swung open. He crept inside with everyone following.

The hallways inside were so dark Ben couldn't see where he was going. But somehow, in the back of his mind, he knew. He put his hand up against the walls to feel his way forward, knowing there would be a turn up ahead, and felt something fall off the wall. It was more of that stupid silty stuff. He examined it crossly with his fingertips. It made his fingers itch and his mind sped up with adrenaline. It was an odd sensation. What was this stuff

An answer finally came to mind – Mal, back when she'd filled his father's office with dust and the only light in the room had been her glowing eyes. Somehow, that explained it all.

"Magic," He whispered aloud to the soldiers behind him. "Magic sand."

Someone else scratched some off the wall. "Feels normal to me." They whispered.

Ben shook his head. Now that he knew, there wasn't a single doubt in his head. "It's definitely magical. It feels like..." He trailed off.

"Like what?" The soldier prompted.
"Like my wife," Ben answered honestly. He'd never really realized it like this before, but Mal brought a certain presence to the room wherever she went. It wasn't just even her. It was… her magic. The same thing existed in the moors. The same thing existed here. Someone had brought magic through the area.

"Cute," The soldier murmured. Ben turned in his direction with a straight-mouthed expression but said nothing on the matter.

"Down the hall, the corridor turns left and right. We want to go left. I don't know what's down the right, but it's nothing pleasant. The left will eventually take a sharp right, and that'll lead us straight into the heart of the building." Ben announced to those behind him. The ranks filled with whispers for a few seconds as the soldiers passed the message to those outside.

"How do you know?" The same soldier asked Ben.

Ben smirked, though no one could see it in the dark. "Magic," He replied snarkily.

The battalion surged past him into the corridor, and Ben quickly became last as he counted all who slid past to make sure no one had slipped away. They continued ahead of him as he hung back and examined the sand at closer length. The longer he held it, the more it seemed to… react to him.

Mal's magic didn't react to him like this…. Mal's magic was comfortable and almost seemed to have the same personality as her – sarcastic and sweet. This almost seemed more like her mother, Maleficent.

And that's when it occurred to him. Maleficent's curse. It still existed on him in a loose, detached form. It had been unraveled and scattered. While the magic types between Auradon and the Overland were different, they must be similar enough to mix just as magic mixed one with each other in Auradon. Like how Mal had mixed her magic with the Fairy Godmother's after taking down the barrier.

Ben dropped the sand and started to stalk down the corridor towards his battalion. They had all gone as instructed and turned left. Ben hurried and at the end of the left corridor saw their silhouettes outlined in deep, scary yellow. It reminded him of an educational movie he'd seen at Auradon Prep on the villains, where Maleficent had first appeared onscreen with a fiery green background and a terrifying scream. Not the most fun way to wake up from a mid-class nap.

Ben dodged through the crowd and clamped his mouth shut as a torrent of senses assaulted him from every side. The corridor had opened up into a circular room, which dropped straight into the ground by several stories. Prison cells were on every single level in groups of five per floor. From each cell arose either deathly silence or weeping, wailing, and the sounds of gnashing teeth. At the bottom of the pit was a collection of bodies, assumedly the prisoners who had died in their cells. A horrible smell arose from down below, like mildew and rot. Ben gagged as he looked down below.

Across the cavern on the same floor, Chad's battalion appeared with the blonde prince at its front. "Chad!" Ben called across the cavern. "The walls have magic sand in them. Be careful!" Chad withdrew his sword with a nod and walked to the first cell. He cut the lock clean off by stabbing through the keyhole. His squad quickly spread out to do the same, but Ben was smarter. He turned to his men. "Help us carry everyone out." He said as Chad's men began to move quickly, swinging down to lower floors to slice locks as quickly as they could. "The more we get out, the better."

Ben swung down to the next level by grabbing the floor and pushing off of it. He swung far out above the pit and then used his momentum to swing directly onto the next floor. As Chad's men began to work on the locks, he walked into the first open cell he could find and discovered an
abnormally tall woman with white hair.

"Hello?" He asked.

She blinked her large blue eyes at him and whispered: "Hello."

"We're taking everyone out of prison," Ben told her. "Can you walk?"

She examined the open doors on her cage as if she thought he was lying. "Maybe." She said. "Are you sure? You're not playing tricks on me, are you?"

"Jack Frost is waiting up front," Ben told her. "He's agreed to hold off Eris as long as he can if she comes. We have to hurry."

The woman knelt down and began to crawl towards the exit. Ben moved out of the way as she wriggled out through the open door and stood. He was amazed. This woman was about fifty feet tall. She examined the roof of the building carefully and then pushed it up. The roof detached completely from the building. She dropped it in the street outside.

"Susan!" Jack called excitedly as he zipped down from the sky to see her. Susan smiled. "Hello, Jack." She smiled.

"How come you didn't just break out before?" Ben asked, looking in amazement at how easy it had been for her to bring the roof down.

"The walls are sealed with magic sand," Susan explained. "They cannot be broken, and they weaken those around them. You'd better get the rest of your friends out before they grow weak as well."

Weakness. Ben's eyes grew wide. And how long had he spent touching that stuff? He was suddenly very worried, but he turned to the task at hand.

Citizens of every type were led out of the prison as Jack flew above them, helping where he could. Ben saw Vikings, cavemen, talking animals the likes of which they didn't have in Auradon and dozens of more creatures. Meanwhile, the magical difference grew more and more obvious to Ben until he wondered how he was just now noticing it. He suddenly realized what Mal had meant by Jack's magic being different. He had a feeling if he got the entire Frost-Elsa family to stand side-by-side, he'd be able to see the differences from person to person plain as day as well.

They'd almost succeeded when an unearthly shriek rose up from the castle up the hill. Jack Frost looked horrified. "That would be the villain known as Chef." He announced to the people down below. "We've got to hurry."

He flew down and began helping prisoners fly from the bottom floor to the top. Ben looked all around and quickly began climbing down to the bottom. The smell grew worse as he went. When he finally got to the bottom, he discovered only two cells occupied. Both locks were still sealed on. One person, a male Bergen, was dead inside his cell. The other was a male caveman with a forlorn, sickly sloth in his lap.

Ben slashed the lock open. "We don't have much time." He rasped. He took the man's hand and pulled him towards the door. Then, he boosted him on his shoulders, and they began to ascend the stone cavern. Ben slashed as many locks as he could find and hoisted prisoners up left and right. As more of his own battalion returned and descended, the prisoners began to disappear from their cells.
Finally, there were only three more floors to go. Ben helped up a woman with black hair who looked exhausted and turned to make sure everyone was off the floor. Something caught his ankle and made him trip. What looked like a long, silken cord had fastened itself around his ankle and was now pulling him towards an open cell. Ben immediately panicked. "Jack!" He yelled.

Soldiers in his battalion looked down and sent up the call. "Something's got the king! Something's got the king!"

Ben followed the chord with his eyes and discovered a purple troll with blue and green hair was determinedly dragging him into the shadows of a cell. He reached for his sword and chopped down on the little lad's hair. A long lock fell limp. Only a few sinews of hair remained tied around Ben's ankle, but more were beginning to grow as the little guy growled determinedly.

Ben yanked his foot away. As Jack zoomed down from the skies to check on him, he got to his feet and discovered a pair of dead eyes staring at him from beside a cell.

His heart did flip-flops inside his chest.

"So, it's you who have stolen our book?" An ugly woman with purple skin and light blue hair asked. She looked like a Bergen. She wore a dirtied chef's outfit with a ragged fanny pack around her middle. Ben got the sudden impression that this was the villain named: "Chef."

"Sorry." Ben shrugged. "Need it, gotta borrow it, anyways, see you later." He tried to jump vertically to the next floor as Jack zoomed down and seized his arm. Chef leaped and seized his ankle. The small purple troll tried to help her, but it was immediately clear they were fighting a losing battle.

Chef hissed at Ben. "When I next see you, don't expect me to be pleasantly anything." She threatened.

Ben smiled weakly. "Let's not let there be a next time, then?" He offered before he kicked out. Chef let go. The troll carried on for a half a second more but let go when he saw Ben was about to be carried up over the pit. He landed on Chef's shoulder with an angry shout.

The prison was quickly being abandoned. Auradonian troops rushed into the portals, pulling former prisoners along with them as Chef screamed blasphemies from the pit below. Goosebumps had risen on Ben's forearms, and he was shaking like a leaf. "You alright?" Jack asked.

"Yeah." Ben nodded. "I'll be fine." He looked down and saw that he was covered in the black sand. He brushed it off his shirt and into his hand while Jack carried him up and out of the building. "I do have a few questions about this stuff, though." Ben decided as he rolled it in his hand and observed the way it looked like sliced jewels but stuck to him like flour. "Something is not right about this stuff."

Chapter End Notes

-she drew a delicate finger across the sensitive area where his shoulder and upper arm muscles met. An itch arose under the skin as she examined him. She met his eyes and all he could see was danger in them.

"Please don't." He commanded, pulling away as best he could. "I'm a married man."
The girl tilted her head and chuckled. "I see." She said. She examined the ring on his finger distastefully, as if its very presence offended her. "Pity to be married so young." She trailed off with a smile.

Ben made a crease in the corner of his mouth. "I actually consider it an achievement." He shrugged as he tried to shy away from her long fingers.

She watched the muscles move in his arm with a crazed light. "You're strong, babe." She whispered as she rose up, moving her mouth closer to his ear.

"Not babe." Ben corrected her with a hard look. "Only my wife calls me that. Not you." It was, he considered briefly, the first time he hadn't reacted to that word without at least a blush.

The girl took hold of his upper arm again and began to trace the fingers of her right hand down his chest as she leaned against his shoulder. "Your wife will probably die eventually." She purred. "If you love me, we could last forever."

Ben wasn't quite sure how she planned to do that. Maybe she had powers over time and aging. Either way, he doubted her honesty and wanted no part in her offer. Ben scoffed and turned away. "I'd rather die tonight than go an hour with you." He informed her as a muscle tightened in his jaw.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Auradon is slowly killing Mal. She makes some changes and turns Adam into the Beast. Ben encounters Eris.

Chapter Notes

A little shorter this week - I moved some of the chapter into the next one.

"Queen Mal!" An attendant rushed down the hall with a stack of papers in their hands. "Before you leave for the Isle of the Lost, you need to complete these for the kingdom of Dun Broch."

Mal frowned at the person as they held the papers out. Her Isle jacket was in one hand and her cell phone in the other. She was clearly about to walk out the door but evidently hadn't managed to escape Auradon in time. "I'm on Isle time," She shook her head, continuing to step away towards the door. "It's on my calendar. I've had it blocked since Tuesday. My other country needs me today."

"Well, Auradon needs you right now," The attendant insisted, trying to hand her the papers. "These have to be submitted tonight. If you can do them right now, then I can send them out before it's too late."

"Where were these yesterday when I was in Ben's and my offices until half past midnight?" Mal demanded. She had so many new bruises and cramps were surfacing in muscles she hadn't used since she left the Isle. A new callous had formed three times over one top of the area her pen would rest when she wrote, and her fingertips had been stained by pen ink to the point she couldn't even scrub it off. "Listen, I'm leaving right now. I'll be back at nine and I'll complete them then."

"Here's a pen," The attendant replied flatly. "And these were in Ben's file holder on his desk. I had to go find them because Dun Broch paged to ask about them." He shoved a pen towards her hand and Mal dropped her phone, which fell to the floor with a clatter. They both winced and, as she started to bend down for it, he held up a hand. "Let me, your majesty."

He reached down, scooped up the phone and examined the screen with an expression that quickly began to fall. Mal stared at him and then sighed. "It's broken, huh?" She asked.

"I'll let Doug know it needs to be repaired and he'll take care of it." The attendant assured her. He reached out for her Isle jacket and Mal deflated as she handed it over.

"Fine," She exhaled, trading him for the papers. "But I have to go after that, otherwise I'll miss the boat for the Isle. I don't have time for Auradon to hold me up like this."
"Well, Auradon doesn't have time for you to leave us as much as you do," The attendant retorted. "Don't forget you're supposed to be in the Moorlands next week, but Arendelle might start a war with Weselton if you don't come up with another solution to their trading dispute."

"I'll deal with it tonight," Mal replied through gritted teeth. She uncapped the pen lid and began scanning the papers for keywords and statements, along with anywhere she needed to sign.

"With all due respect, your Highness," the attendant mumbled in a low voice, "You've said that about nine other things already."

She knew she had. And she knew, vaguely, what they were as well. Something for Arendelle… something for Oceania… A couple of things about the war… She shook her head and growled as she shoved the finished papers back towards the attendant and snatched her jacket and phone away from the attendant.

"I'm leaving now," She announced, shoving her phone into her pocket. "If anything else comes up, drop it on mine or Ben's desk and I'll deal with it before I go to bed tonight. You don't chase Ben around the castle, so I don't understand why you're trying to do it with me."

"Your Majesty, the King can aptly balance his workload without skipping four meals in a row," The attendants pointed out in a nagging tone.

Mal snarled and felt a bit of steam waft up from her hair and her horns appeared past her locks. The attendant backed off, looking afraid. "Ben isn't balancing three countries!" She snapped and then turned to storm out. Did she have everything? Her jacket was slung over her arm, her now-broken phone was in her back pocket, that should be every-

Her shoes. Her shoes were beside the door.

They'd been covered with mud last time she went to the Isle due to a rainstorm that had swept through the area, and Lumiere had been kind enough to clean them off for her, but they'd never been returned to her room. She almost walked outside with no shoes on before she stopped and snatched them up.

It was almost November… just a few more days and then she'd finally be able to leave Auradon and go to the Moorlands. Sure, she'd have to take all of the available work with her, only stay for three weeks instead of the full month, and return after two weeks to grab anything from Auradon that was falling behind in being completed, but she'd be able to complete all her usual duties in the moorlands and escape the constant rush of people. Also, she'd be able to recharge magically, which would be wonderful.

Ben's kingdom, she was being reminded, was so secretive! Mal had forgotten about how she wasn't allowed to talk to anyone or share information across the kingdoms. Ben, who had been raised in secrecy, made it barely noticeable. How was work? It was stressful. What did he do? He signed papers and helped people resolve arguments.

But, underneath the surface, it was so much more.

He had to write epistles to the other kingdoms forbidding them from warring with each other and ensure national protection services, national emergency services, and national monetary services were all functioning, and approve every law in every kingdom within a certain amount of time. Not to mention the political agenda – Mal had had no idea how many people were trying to usurp Ben. He'd never mentioned it to her outside of a brief summary, but she'd had nine different spontaneous meetings where people walked in to examine her work and check through Ben's office on claims of
corruption, and Ben had only been gone a few weeks.

With the Isle, it was simple. She had to spell the walls so that the rain and storms wouldn't damage them over time, finish paving a path from the docks to the city, and then begin writing laws regarding business monopolies and corruption. She didn't have to jump through hoops to do the things she wanted – she just had to ensure nothing would eventually backfire on her or the community.

Her phone buzzed in her jacket. Mal pulled it out and squinted through the cracks to see a message from Audrey. "Are you not coming down again?" It read.

Mal sliced her thumb on the screen as she tried to open it – it was easy to do since her skin was so dry – and grumbled as she typed out: "Keep getting held up. Be there soon."

"Queen Mal," a voice sounded in front of her. Mal looked up and found three men in front of her. One had pasty white skin, another had coppery tones, and the third had dark, thickly-pigmented skin. All wore top hats, white button-up shirts, and black suits. Mal deflated.

"I'm out of office now, gentlemen," She declared. "I'm leaving for the Isle. You'll have to come back later.

"We're an appraisal committee from Andalusia," The dark-skinned man announced. "We're investigating a report of misconduct."

Mal stared at them. "I have had nine of you guys already, from nine separate countries. How am I supposed to get any work done if I have to drop everything whenever one of you shows up? Surely you don't accuse Ben of all this… rubbish?"

The men glanced at each other and Mal looked skyward. "Fine," She hissed, blinking back a few sparse, stressed tears. "Let me… give me a moment." She bit on her blood-covered thumb for a few moments and then opened her phone again. To Audrey, she said: "My plans were just forcibly cleared up for me. I'll try and make it to the Isle tomorrow."

Even though this was the tenth time she had said that. She'd been ruling the Isle purely from her office and hoped none of the Isle Residents were taking advantage of her absence to see how far they could stretch her rules. Sure, everything had been smooth so far, but she was working with an island of former villains and their children.

"Again?" Audrey asked. Mal couldn't find it in her to respond as she shoved her phone into her pocket and turned to disappear.

"I'm going to kill someone," Mal announced through the low lights in the office as she stared at her right hand, the ring finger of which had completely bruised over from writing. The brightest light in the dim room was her cell phone, signaling a call to Evie. "If someone else stops me from leaving for the Isle or to my bedroom, I'm going to return to my villainous childhood and barbecue them."

"You're doing too much, Mal," Evie whispered. "Why don't you have Belle and Adam take over?"

"Can't," Mal shook her head. "This is all official stuff I'm struggling with. It all needs a signature, or it requires a member of the royal party, currently consisting of Ben and I. Belle and Adam have taken over literally everything they're allowed to without me changing their titles. Not that that doesn't mean Adam isn't still trying to put his fingerprints over everything and hunting through Ben's office."
"Hunting through Ben's office?" Evie repeated, sounding dumbfounded. Mal let out a flabbergasted groan.

"I think he's hoping to stumble upon Ben's laws-in-progress. Ben moved them to… well, actually, I'm not allowed to tell you *that* either." Mal grumbled as she slumped into her chair. "I hate this. I hate everything."

"Maybe you should stay in Auradon to catch up?" Evie suggested. "I mean, Mal, you're struggling. It's obvious."

Mal burst into tears. It was like she'd been holding up a wall blocking a reservoir and now all the water was spilling out over the top and crashing down over her head. "I don't want to stay in Auradon!" She sobbed. "I'm so sick of people barging in and messing everything up… Ben's job sucks and I hate it! I just want to be on the Isle or in the moors and just… not here."

Mal's heart thudded in disappointment. She wiped her tears away with her fingertips and then reached for a box of tissues. She wanted out. She was being trapped with all this work and, well, the Enchantress had called it. She was done.

Something had to give. Either her sanity or Auradon itself.

Evie had gone silent, obviously unsure of what to do, so Mal reached over and picked up her phone. "I'm, uh, going to go. I just… can't. I'll talk to you later." She heard Evie start to reply but hung up.

Her fingers were cramped up and bruises stretched across her fingertips, but Mal woke her computer back up and opened a new word file. It took all of three minutes to create a rough draft of what she wanted, and then an extra fifteen to make it look official and make sure everything read smoothly without errors. Then, she sent the file to Doug and began the next one.

Ben had left Auradon in her hands. He'd given her permission to make changes. She figured that he'd approve of her efforts, even if he didn't find out about them for a while.

After her fourth change, a knock sounded at the door. She looked up and spotted Lumiere, dressed in his nightclothes and with a woolen hat on his head, and dropped her hands as he stepped inside. He examined the work on the desk and her mistreated hands. "It's late, Mal," He whispered.

"I know," Mal nodded. "I'm just finishing things. Honest, Lumiere."

Lumiere shook his head. "Ben wouldn't like this, Mal," He reprimanded.

"He doesn't like it. And neither do I," Mal pointed out. "But we have to go through with it. It's our duty." She stood up, rubbing her knuckles and wincing in pain. "But… I'm sick of it. I've been forced to deal with Auradon and now… it's time they returned the favor."

Lumiere stared at her, looking extremely cautious. "How about we get you to sleep, miss? You can consider turning Auradon into a more acceptable community in the morning."

Mal nodded in agreement and carefully got to her feet. Her feet and legs were stiff too. "Okay," She sighed, and then carefully bent her fingers to pop each of her joints with a loud, satisfying crack. "I'm, uh, going to close up then." She felt on the underside of her computer for the sleep function. She paused, staring at Lumiere. "I can't remember if I locked up Ben's office or not," She mumbled, touching her fingertips to her head.

"I can walk by and-" Lumiere began, but Mal waved a hand to cut him off.
"No," she shook her head. "No. I need to check something anyways." She picked up her phone and noticed several long strings of questions from Doug, who had already discovered her changes. Perfect. She flipped off the light, wincing as the switch dug into her bruised finger, and patted Lumiere's shoulder as she passed by him and turned into the hall, on her way to Ben's office.

She could hear mumbling as she approached. The light was on, and one long shadow stretched across the room. Mal grit her teeth. She slipped past the doorframe without a sound and leaned against the wall right beside the light. Adam was looking through the cabinets on the far side of the room. On Ben's desk was an open book of records from the last five months and several pieces of mail, all opened. The mail was fine, as Adam and Belle were allowed to look through it unless it was sealed with a certain stamp, but Mal frowned as she glanced at the open drawers in the desk, the files jostled inside the filing cabinet, and her and Ben's picture knocked over on the desk among a clutter of pens and pencils.

Adam didn't notice her as he mumbled to himself, tracing the spines of several books with his finger and muttering under his breath: "Laws… laws… laws."

"The law says you shouldn't be in there," Mal called.

Adam jumped and leaped around in the same motion, snarled in surprise and preparing to lash out before he caught sight of her and relaxed. "Mal," He breathed. "A few more papers came in for you – I read through them but they're just permit requests from-"

"Adam," Mal interrupted, letting her eyes light up and crossing her arms as her horns poked up underneath her hair. "You know you're going too far." She flicked her fingers and Ben's desk straightened itself up. Pens flew back into their holder, drawers closed, everything returned to its nice and neat state. The way Ben liked it. The way she liked it.

Adam's hair was rising on end. "You can't do that here, Mal," He warned. "Magic… it's still illegal."

"Here's the deal, Adam," Mal grit her teeth. "It's clear you're not going to stop invading, so I might as well tell you what's going on with all those things you're so concerned about. Ben's laws and his important stuff?" She paused, watching Adam flush a little without showing the slightest regret. It made her angry, how he thought he was entitled to his son's work. "They've been cursed. If you get too close to them, you'll be reliving the way you were when Belle first met you. I'm tired of warning you."


Adam's eyes grew large and bold. "You… you can't! It's illegal. Even the Queen can be prosecuted!"

"For magic performed outside of Auradon?" Mal replied sweetly.

Adam balled his fists up and growled. Mal let the corner of her mouth crook up as she imagined all of Ben's things safely in her office across the sea, where Adam would likely never set foot. Drastic times called for drastic measures.

It was odd, standing up to her father-in-law. She'd had disagreements with him, of course, but she had always stood back as Ben fought with him. She'd never actually stood up to him.

"Starting tomorrow, it will be illegal for anyone to come through either Ben or my offices without a member of the royal party. I'll come in so you can grab stuff, but this – you sneaking around – is
ridiculous. I've already submitted the paperwork to make it a law." She crossed her arms and Adam's growl turned into a ferocious snarl.

"Have you spoken to Ben about this?" He asked, stepping toward her so that his shadow fell over her. Mal felt like she was standing under her mother and let her horns out even more as he drew closer.

"I don't need to," She replied simply. "I'm queen, remember?"

"I knew you would manipulate us all," Adam grit out.

The words went through Mal like a bullet through her chest. She narrowed her eyes. "Yes, now that I'm stopping you from overstepping bounds Ben has already told you to keep behind, I'm the villain."

"Don't put this on me!" Adam yelled, spit flying from his lips and Mal's eardrums hammering at the sudden volume. "This is my kingdom!"

"It is not!" Mal yelled back in such an explosive manner that Adam was pushed back a few feet. "This is Ben's kingdom! You always forget – you are not the king! You will never be king again!"

"I am still in power!" Adam snarled. He took a swipe at the pen jar on Ben's desk and it went smashing to the ground, hurling pieces of porcelain into the carpet. His skin was going darker, and his hands seemed longer. "Have you forgotten that Ben gets his power from me? The people still respect me over him?"

"Who?" Mal demanded. She held up a patronizing finger. "Everyone I know – from Elsa to Jack Frost – holds Ben in higher respect. Think about it – the man who is reopening the barrier to the Moorlands, who took off the Isle from Auradon expenses and who is making the land more habitable, and the man who-"

"Who has the most powerful person in his grasp?" Adam cut her off and took a swipe at her hand, which was still aloft, to force her to put it down. "Any imagined power Ben has comes from the threat of a magical person who refuses to conform to our laws. What else have you been putting into motion?"

"Ben doesn't control me!" Mal snapped at him. The windows fractured and the lights flickered, but both were getting angrier and angrier. Mal could feel her magic seething with her – every pent-up emotion from the last few weeks and the stress of Auradon demanding everything about her and her worry for her countries, for Ben…

"He got you to stay behind and play housekeeper to his country," Adam claimed. "Poor, tiny Mal, staying behind to watch his people and raise her baby while he goes off to play the hero?"

Mal extended her hand, and magic exploded from her fingertips like a cannon blast. Adam went hurtling from across the room and hit the wall completely on his spine. He slumped to the carpet, gasping, but Mal doubted he was hurt. More likely stunned – especially as he watched hair growing on his hands and his fingernails turning into jagged claws.

Mal watched as Ben's father returned to the beast right in front of her eyes.

There was a gasp from behind her. Lumiere, who had followed her, was standing with a hand to his throat as he watched Adam slowly get up and examine his hands in horror. Mal had to hand it to Belle for falling for him as cruel and hideous as Adam had been. Horrible, crooked, sharp horns extended out of Adam's head, and mangy fur covered his face so much that Mal couldn't even
discern where his cheeks and brow line would begin. He felt his face carefully and then turned to
her with his eyes blazing.

"What have you done?" He growled.

"It'll be gone in the morning," Mal declared. "Maybe it'll remind you of what you're not supposed
to be."

Adam leaped at her, snarling, and his growl was so loud that Mal saw lights explode behind her
eyes before three red-hot lines appeared on her cheek. She let her magic react without her
permission, and when the room returned to normal, there was a large black box in front of her, and
Ben's desk had been pushed evenly up against the wall. Lumiere was sitting down in the hall,
gasping for breath and feeling up and down his arms, making sure he wasn't returning to his

Mal put her hand up to the box. It was tall, about Adam's height, and wide. She could hear, like
echoes from miles away, Adam slamming his hands against it. Mal closed her eyes and tried to feel
out where it had come from, what she had accidentally summoned. An image, unbidden, of the
Beast slamming his fists against his own reflection appeared. She swallowed. "I… think it's a box
of mirrors. I didn't mean to conjure it, but… I'm going to leave it here until morning."

"Mademoiselle," Lumiere gasped. "I think… you ought to--"

Mal turned around, wiping stubborn tears out of her eyes. "Lumiere, I'm not going to bring him
back just so he can yell at me!"

Lumiere stared at her, looking frightened, regretful and sympathetic all at once. Somewhere in the
mess of all of that was the man who'd been locked inside of a metallic prison, who'd watched Belle
and Adam grow old, and then watched Ben grow and marry her. He looked like he was seeing her
for the first time as someone potentially dangerous, but considering she'd just brought the Beast
back into existence, could she blame him?

Her head felt tight as she shook it fiercely. "I'll bring him back in the morning. In the morning…
we'll sort this all out."

She tried to step past him, but Lumiere seized her arm. "Mal," He whispered urgently, "You can't
leave him in there like that. It's cruel and – Ben wouldn't approve."

"Stop using him against me!" Mal declared, ripping her arm out of Lumiere's grasp. "Is it not
enough that he's gone and I'm alone? Is it too little that everyone is reminding me that 'you're not
Ben, Mal', 'Ben doesn't do it like this, Mal'?"

"He was snooping around," Lumiere protested. "He doesn't deserve to have a monstrous memory
restored and then to be trapped-"

"Then I guess I'm no better than he was to leave us all locked away," Mal spat.

"You are dredging up the past!" Lumiere exploded. Mal had never seen the kind man so off-kilter.
"You're being irrational and irresponsible with your power! The palace needs a queen, not a
menace!"

Mal sealed his mouth closed with two fingers pinched together. Lumiere panicked, feeling his body
to make sure he was still human, and Mal felt a pinch of guilt for making him panic so. Then he
reached out to try and grab her shoulders and another flare of anger made her magic just to her
defense. Green light beamed off her skin, searing hot, and Lumiere stopped moving towards her.
Mal ducked under his arm and stormed away, leaving Ben's office unlocked and with all the lights on. It didn't matter much, she thought. He was away. He wouldn't know.

She slammed the door to their room with such force that the frame broke and the door swung out into the hall before the force of momentum brought it back around and it clicked from the wrong angle. She sealed it shut with magic and then sealed the bedroom door and all the windows for good measure. She shut her phone in a drawer somewhere and then shut herself in Ben's closet in their room.

His smell – fancy cologne and new things and books and all things home – made her start sobbing all over again. And it was only then that she felt any hint of guilt. Guilt over abusing her magic and hurting Adam, guilt over overreacting with both Lumiere and Adam, guilt for doing it all while Ben was away.

She buried her face in one of his blue button-up shirts to try and imagine it was him, and then immediately regretted the motion because now her mascara was all over the article and it would have to be washed. Still… it wouldn't matter if she held onto it for a while, right? It wasn't like he would be needing the formal clothes anytime soon.

She pulled her shirt off over her head and did his up over her head. It was at least five sizes too big, hung down past her knees, and made her feel a lot better than she had in weeks.

From a distance, she unsealed Lumiere's lips and then convinced herself to let Adam be – at least until morning. Then, she'd undo it and apologize with Belle nearby to calm them both down.

In the morning, everything would be okay.

Belle pursed her lips and focused on the box as Mal ran her hands up and down the sides of it, trying to fix it. Behind her was Lumiere, who hadn't said a word to her, and Doug, who was holding the four changes she'd made to Auradon's laws, waiting to be signed into effect. He hadn't quite grasped what the gigantic box was, but he had gathered that it wasn't good and that everyone was angry about it.

Mal tucked her thumb into the corner and split the vertice apart like it was a muffin or some sort of pastry. Then, she pushed the wall away like the entire structure was a box that opened on triangular hinges. She looked inside and nearly jumped to see her own mottled, red face peering back at her from the mirrors inside. Even though she'd slept for almost eleven hours, she felt restless and exhausted. Ben's shirt still hung loosely, almost indecently, on her frame, but no amount of cologne and starched suits could heal the amount of overwork she'd been put through overnight.

On the floor, resting against an upward-facing mirror, was Adam. He was curled into a ball, shaking a little, covering his face as he rested. His claws were bloody, and some had been snapped into shards, but none of the mirrors had broken or been scratched. As his prison moved apart, he woke, snarling a little as he shook himself out of sleep. Doug made a horrified sound behind Belle and Lumiere, while Belle began to sniffle a little in disappointment. Mal stared down at the Beast as he looked deliriously up and her and waved her fingers to make him fade back into his human form. Belle moved past her as skin replaced hair and horns and claws disappeared. Adam's fingertips were still bloodied up, but looking down at her own mistreated hands, Mal didn't feel much regret. She let her hand skim the mirrors and then urged them to disappear and return to where they had come from.

Belle helped Adam, who was shaking as he examined his hands, to his feet. She whispered in his ear and rubbed his arms a little while Adam's gaze focused on Mal, who went to Ben's desk and,
with a few huffs, pushed it back into place. Once everything was how Ben would have it if he was here, she folded her arms across her chest, leaned back into the desk, and stared out the window. "I'm sorry," She began slowly, "for turning you into the Beast. It was… cruel, and you didn't deserve it." Her gaze fell to her fingertips as she curled them over her arm. "Things haven't been easy for me, and I let myself be hurt by your words."

He did deserve it. He did. But Mal was the queen, and she had to be the better person. She was the one with magic, and so she had to be the better person. She was the one who was supposed to be in charge, holding everyone together while the real leader was away. She wasn't allowed to lose her temper and dole out punishments.

Adam sniffed and turned a cold shoulder to her words. But it was fine because he was the one who had been wronged in the other's eyes. So, she supposed, she was supposed to give him respect he hadn't earned because he was her father-in-law and because he had been hurt by her actions. Never mind all that he had said about her.

Adam kept turned away from her and Belle still wouldn't meet her eyes – she hadn't since Mal had begrudgingly opened her room back up and fixed her own doorframe. She probably wouldn't for some time still.

Mal pushed herself up off the desk and skirted around the older couple as she went to Doug and held her hand out for his papers. With some hesitancy, he handed them over, and Mal glanced through them before she set them down on Ben's desk and took a seat in his chair. Finally, Belle and Adam looked over as she picked a pen and balanced it in her hand among the bruises. "What's that?" Adam asked in a voice that sounded like sandpaper felt.

Mal glanced up at him as she scribbled her signature across the line with the title 'Queen' attached. A magical seal appeared in the top right-hand corner. "I told you. I'm fixing things," she whispered. "From here on out, it is illegal for any person over the age of twelve to search through the royal parties' offices without one member of such present."

She set the paper aside as Belle cleared her throat. "Is that what happened?" She whispered. "You were snooping again?" She looked back at Mal. "Sweetheart," she called, letting go of Adam's arm to step forward and take her chin. "I know it's hard with Ben being gone, and your emotions must be insane right now, but this isn't an appropriate reaction."

Mal pushed Belle's hand away irritably. Yes, there was that too. She was irrational. Irrational and delicate and misinformed. Never mind all the awful things Adam had said. Never mind everyone chasing her around and trying to keep her in the palace. It was just her emotions. Just the fact she was pregnant and her husband was gone.

"For here on out, all investigations against the palace are to be published to the public, and without physical evidence of misconduct or a witness allegation, the royal party may only be randomly investigated once per term," Mal declared, signing her name across another paper. "I can't have people holding me up anymore. If multiple kingdoms are concerned about me turning Auradon evil while Ben is away, they'll have to work together on their concerns. It'll be good for them to talk to each other anyways."

"That's smart," Doug nodded. "And a term is six months, right? From Winter Solstice to Summer Solstice." He came to stand beside her and turned on the computer as she reviewed what she'd written last night.

"I'm going to force everyone to do their own inter-kingdom policies," Mal continued, squinting at the official font. Five minutes reading and her stress and lack-of-food-and-sleep migraine had
It's ridiculous how Charmington comes to talk to me about their roads to Auroria instead of talking to them. If I have to step in, I will, but they need to communicate first. This back-and-forth... it's going to kill me if I don't stop it." She scribbled her name and set it atop the other three, which Doug picked up and began to scan into the computer for her. Mal smiled at him.

"What's that last one?" Doug asked as a document scan appeared on the computer screen.

Mal shrugged. "A couple of other things for the kingdoms. Any inter-kingdom war declared will now be considered a declaration of war against the High Palace, any private corporation must petition their local kings and queens for issues and are not allowed to randomly propose things to the High Government, and they can all manage their own building and roadway management while I'll continue to approve things for them." She signed it with a shake of her head and then reached for her phone. Doug scanned the last document into the computer for her and arranged them all into an email format. Mal took pictures of the new statements, making sure the Auradon seal was clear in the corner, and then paused to look over the email Doug had arranged to all the secondary royalty in Auradon. Without any hesitation, she hit send and sent him a grateful look. Then, she opened her phone. Her palace page had been mostly dead since Ben had left. Now, there was her first real 'Official' announcement.

Mal ran her hands through her hair and shook her head as she looked all around the office. "I'm not going to spend another day here. I want out and away," She declared. "I'm going to the Isle today. I'll take some stuff for Auradon with me, but I'm leaving."

Mal stood up, swept a pile of things into her arms, and then turned away. "Goodbye," She bid the room without another word. Somehow, she doubted anyone would try and sabotage Ben's office while she was gone. What a relief.

Hades was waiting for her on the beach. He had a heavy brown and grey leather coat and dozens of skulls hanging around his neck and was warming his hands with his ember. His face didn't change when she stepped off the ship, but he did tuck the blue gem into his pocket and straighten up. She focused on not tripping down the gangplank and then paused in front of him.

"You look like my Cerberus chewed you up and spat you back out," Hades observed, frowning a little at her eyes. He reached up like he was going to check for any sparse tears, but then forced his hands back to his sides and then into his pockets. "Your friend said that the palace has been working you hard."

"Yeah," Mal agreed, nodding a little. She did up the extra zippers on her Isle Jacket for warmth. Before coming, she'd convinced herself to change out of Ben's shirt, but not she had one of his too-small t-shirts tucked into her jeans instead. This was the kind of shirt that, if it had been him wearing it, would have flaunted every muscle he had and would have driven her wild. "It's been hard," she whispered, tucking her hands into her jeans.

"They, uh, chasing you down?" Hades asked, shifting his weight a little as they began to walk down the gangplank.

"Yeah," Mal nodded. "There's so much... crap that Ben has to sort through and I'm not really... trained to do it all. Especially with the Isle."

Hades remained silent, and somehow that prompted Mal to keep talking. "I just... I've never had to stay in one place, and now everyone is insistent on keeping an eye on me. I can't go anywhere or do anything! And my head and my hands are breaking from all the stupid crap I have to deal with. Look at these bruises!" Mal held her hands out to display them. "And no one notices. They think..."
it's just because I'm not used to it! Like, sure, but I still have to do the paperwork for the Isle and my hands have never cracked and bled before." Mal shoved her hands back into her pockets and kicked at the beach a little in frustration. "And no one stops to think about me. Maybe that's selfish to complain about, but they keep writing me off. They think the reason I'm so upset is that-

She cut herself off. Her stomach turned. Hades didn't know yet, about the thing inside her. He didn't know. Almost no one in Auradon or on the Isle knew. Mal didn't even know if Audrey knew yet. Probably, since Adam had spilled the news on her, but she didn't know. Hades definitely didn't. She didn't know if she wanted Hades to know.

"Because?" Her dad repeated, arching an eyebrow at her.

"Because Ben is gone," Mal answered, taking two fast steps forward and turning her gaze downward. "They think I'm overreacting because I miss him."

Hades took a dry chuckle. "They're right," He laughed.

Mal wrinkled her nose. "Okay, you know what, you don't have to be like that," She reprimanded as Hades laughed.

"It's gonna be okay, Mallie," He chuckled. "You'll figure out how to balance it."

She had to pause then, because who would have thought Hades would ever be able to comfort her? Or that he would try? She shoved her heads into her legs and raked her nails against the fabric covering her legs. "I miss mom," She admitted, softly, to him. "Or, I guess I kinda miss the idea of her. Everything has been so crazy and my life now… I wish I could ask her… I don't know."

"Little girl, you're better off without your mom," Hades snorted. "Believe me, I know. That woman is… I mean, try being married to her."

Mal felt the indescribable need to turn and run far, far away. She closed her eyes and slowed her steps. "Well, I have things I wanted to ask her. I mean… She went through, I mean, she…" Mal shut her mouth. She couldn't explain this without letting her dad in on the secret that everyone was blaming everything on. It was nicer like this. It was nice to forget she was supposed to be a queen and it was nice to get advice from him. It was nice that he didn't know yet.

The sudden grinding of sword against sword drew Mal's attention. She snapped her head up and realized they'd reached the city. In the center of the street was a figure in dark blue and a figure in pastel pink, who both held swords aloft and were attacking each other with everything they had. "Hey!" Mal began, but then stopped when she realized it was only Evan and Audrey. She barely recognized Audrey. She'd added more pastel streaks into her hair, but her long locks were up on top of her head in a messy bun instead of down in princess waves. Her pink clothes were ripped and dyed with random splotches of color and she had a cut across her cheek. Only a thin one, but still.

Evan kicked Audrey back and the sword slipped out of her hand. As it went clattering across the rocks, Audrey let loose a torrent of swear words and insults. "You two-faced baboon!" She snapped. "Tell me you've got better than that, princess!" Evan returned, laughing. "You're so bad at this that you'd be considered a prime captive for Auradon's Isle."

"Audrey?" Mal called. The two turned and stared at her. Then Evan laughed.

"You lost in front of the queen!" He taunted. "She's gonna have to demote you now."
Audrey growled and rolled her eyes good-naturedly before waving at Mal. "Finally made it out?" She asked. "Check out what we've done with the place!" She gestured around them, and Mal realized that decorations, signs, and greenery had sprung up all over the area. She glanced over bushes, street signs, business indicators, and then examined a rock decoration that crept up the front of the orphanage building. It appeared to be made of chips of concrete, and… was that spray paint?

"Did you guys bring this stone in from the old Isle of the Lost?" Mal asked, pointing to where green tints of spray paint crept around the edges of the chips.

"From the buildings that fell," Audrey nodded, getting to her feet. "There was paint on them – I was told it was yours?"

It was hers. From a lifetime ago. Now, all her talents were being repurposed. Mal nodded thoughtfully. "You guys did good," she whispered.

Evan had come down off of his emotional high and was now creeping closer to her and Hades, cautiously putting his sword down as he went. He watched her examine the fragments of her old work, and Hades outstretched an arm for him to slip underneath. He clapped him on the shoulder twice, and then let him go. It was such an odd motion – like something a father would do to a son. Mal could imagine Adam doing the same thing to her or Ben.

Audrey dropped her sword beside Evan's. "You feeling okay?" She asked Mal, wrinkling up her nose. "You look like you've been-

"Stressed," Mal cut Audrey off. Audrey's pointed glance at her midsection confirmed everything Mal needed to know. "I'm not sick. Only stressed." She shook her head. "And I don't know when I'll be able to come back out, so you all need to take me around and show me what's happened."

Audrey nodded and began to walk them toward the government building. Hades put an arm around Mal and then, under her observation, an arm around Evan. The other boy relaxed a little and Mal compared Hades' stance with both her, his daughter, and Evan, who he was treating like family.

Maybe she had some sort of adopted brother now, too?

"You sure you're not sick?" Evan asked. "You look like you're wiped out. Is there something else going on at the palace?"

"I'm not sick," Mal grit her teeth. "Nothing else is happening and I'm fine."

Hades looked down at her with a raised eyebrow and Mal sighed before she ducked out from under his arm and sped up to walk beside Audrey. Audrey glanced sideways at her, and Mal felt a surge of anger. It wasn't the baby. She was being perfectly reasonable. It made perfect sense for her to be angry. Not everything had to be heaped on her like this.

God, she hated it all.

It was the last day of October. It was freezing.

Ben stood in garrison with the other troops as they waited. They'd been docked for only five minutes at Syracuse, where Eris was supposedly hiding out. At the same time, North, Hiccup, Jack, and Bunny were leading battalions around the Overland, trying to draw fire and manpower away from the pirate Sinbad's city. Ever since the raid on the prison, they'd been waiting for people to recover, hoping they'd have stronger forces. While many of the Vikings sided with Hiccup to join
battle efforts, a great many more were too scared by their ordeals to consider willingly marching into battle. Some did, like Susan, but they were hardly a majority.

Now they stood on the lower plateau of the city docks, where they'd just landed. The docks were made of stone and concrete and extended out into the ocean almost a mile long. Above their heads, a beautiful castle reached towards the sky. It would have been glorious if not for the black chaos sand and the smell of ashes everywhere. They began the march up to the Syracuse castle, where Prince Proteus, heir of Syracuse, had promised a small group would meet them. About twenty other troops – a small group – waited with him on the dock. They held the book of peace wrapped in leather and waiting to be placed in the temple, where it belonged. The hope was that the artifact would restore the land and shock Eris enough to fight her out of Syracuse, but to be honest Ben was a bit skeptical about that plan, though it had worked before.

As they came to the end of the docks, a man appeared at the base of the path. He had light brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and wore royal blues similar to what Ben would wear at the castle. He was unarmed.

"Prince Proteus." Someone said in surprise from Ben's group. "We didn't think you were coming down to meet us."

"I wasn't going to," Proteus frowned. The prince had worry lines in his face. "Something horrible has happened at the palace." He turned to Ben. "Please, walk with me a moment so we can discuss."

Something in the back of Ben's head immediately asked: "Aren't you going to introduce yourself to me?" He shook it off and nodded. They left the group on the edge of the docks and began to walk away down the harbor.

"I am glad to see you brought armed men." Proteus sighed as they walked. "The situation grows direr every day. Eris is here, as we speak."

"Why are we down here then, and not up there?" Ben asked with a frown.

Proteus examined the sword at Ben's hilt. "Pardon, but may I see your sword? I've never seen one like it before."

Ben raised an eyebrow as he unsheathed his sword. It was the golden-hilted double blade, so he wasn't surprised that the man wanted to see it. He handed it to Proteus. "How did Eris get into the palace?" He asked Proteus. "And how many men do you have stationed up at the palace?"

"None," Proteus answered, holding the sword up to his eyes in amazement as he examined the intricate double guard.

"None?" Ben repeated. "I only have a small group; how will we fight Eris?"


Ben stared. He looked down at the sword in Proteus's hands. An intense feeling of dread filled him. "Please, may I have that back?" He whispered.

Proteus clenched his fist around the sword, and it disappeared in a puff of smoke. "No." He smiled. His eyes changed color from blue to gold.

Someone tapped Ben's shoulder. "Nice to see you again, Princey." A sugar-sweet voice said from behind him. Ben didn't need to turn to know it was Chef, back from the prison. He looked down at
the far end of the harbor. His men were still waiting for him. They had the book of peace with
them. Proteus followed his gaze.

"Oh, that old thing?" Proteus - Eris - smiled and waved his – her - hand in the general direction of
the book. "They were fools to think it would work against me." Her eyes hardened. "You're all
fools."

Ben swallowed. "Where's the real Proteus?" He whispered.

Eris hummed. "Away," She whispered. Ben clenched his clammy hands to keep them from
shaking. He was unarmed and separated from his men. Jack Frost was on the South Side of the
country, fighting a mind-numbing battle of Ice to try and keep the sea of monsters intact. He was
alone.

There was a horrifying shriek, like a baboon and a bird together, and something black with a
multitude of fur and feathers raced down the hill. Ben's squad yelled in alarm. The one with the
book of peace tucked under his arm withdrew his sword and began to race to the end of the pier
where the ship was still docked. As he hit the gangplank, the ship rocked. Long tentacles rose out
of the water and wrapped around the mast. The poor soldier barely had time to jump back off the
gangplank before the ship was pulled onto its starboard side and began to capsize.

Proteus's image began to dissolve as Ben looked on in horror. The band holding Proteus's hair
disappeared as Eris's hair turned black and silky. It seemed to defy all physics as it flew around her
head. She had greyish skin and the cornea of her eyes was a bloodthirsty red centered in a mass of
gold. As she morphed, she grew taller until she was staring down her nose at Ben with a smile.

She reached forward, seized Ben's chin, and twisted his head from left to right as she examined
him. "Oh." She said with a sigh. Her voice sounded much more feminine now that she wasn't
mimicking Proteus. "It's a shame you aren't as cute as the last one they sent."

Ben moved his head away from her grasp. "Well, it's a shame you aren't as petty as the last villain I
killed." He sighed.

Eris laughed. "Don't play me, pretty boy." She crooned. "You don't look like you've ever killed a
soul in your life."

Ben squared his shoulders and tried to look impressive. "Want to bet?" He challenged.

Eris rolled her eyes. "I'll take my chances." She smiled. Her face hardened, and she snapped her
fingers. "Seize them." She commanded as the sea monster rose out of the sea and onto the deck,
and the feathered baboon let out a wicked, feral yell.

Ben dug his nails into his palm and swung. His right fist connected with Eris's jaw and he quickly
followed it up by knocking his left into her chin, knocking her head up in a way that would have
knocked out, or at least seriously dazed, any human he knew. Eris vanished into a whirl of sand
that expanded and blacked out the sun and the light around him. Sand filled his eyes, mouth, ears,
and nose. Magic sand. Deadly sand. He could vaguely hear the sounds of the squadron as Eris's
monster attacked them. He brought his hands up, squinting as he struggled to blink the sand out of
his eyes, and swung blindly. His hands were caught and pulled behind his back and pinned. He
tried to kick backward, but nothing was there to connect with.

He caught a glimpse of wood as Chef swung a ladle towards his head and felt consciousness fade
as a deep throbbing began in his skull. Meanwhile, the sands swirled increasingly thick and dark,
until finally, he couldn't even tell if he had closed his eyes or not.
I know it's shorter and not as much pizzazz. Next chapter will be exciting - We'll meet a new villain, Adam makes a horrible mistake, and we may or may not have a dragon depending on how things work.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Ben is poisoned. Mal heads north.

Chapter Notes

11 weeks until Christmas.
12 weeks until New Year's.
12 weeks until this story is finished.

For almost two days after his capture, Ben was chained by his wrists, all four of his fingers, his feet and his shoulders, to a cold, stone wall. The room was small, with only enough floor space to lie down in, and completely made of rocky grey stone. Chef had let him keep his thick armor, which had helped with warmth. He also got to keep his shoes. Meanwhile, the metal froze his fingers one by one and pressed into the skin on his arms, making them sore and tender. He passed out twice and only knew the passage of time by murmurs of passerby outside his room.

Near the end of the second day, as Ben's eyelids began to grow heavy, he heard whispers down the hall. His head was foggy, so it was a little hard to focus, but he was able to make out a rough, agitated male and a smooth woman's voices.

"A southland prince?" The woman crooned. Her voice reminded Ben of Eris's.

"King." The man corrected.

Ben wondered how they knew who he was. It wasn't like North and Bunny, who seemed to be the leaders of the resistance, had shouted: "This is the king!" From the rooftops. Then he remembered how the soldiers had sent up the cry: "It's the king!" when that purple troll had fastened his hair onto Ben's ankle. He couldn't think of any other way they would know who he was.

He heard something that must have been footsteps, though it sounded more like when you pushed your hand into pebbles or gravel or sand.

Ben's veins filled with dread. He pushed himself up and tried to appear like the king he was as a medium-height, dark-haired lady appeared in the doorway. She was young – just a little older than Mal – maybe eighteen or nineteen and extremely amorous. Ben felt his hair rise on end. There was something distinctly unreal about her. He tried to keep calm. "I don't suppose you're here to let me out?" He asked as he examined her.

She laughed and shook her head. Her long hair drifted and waved as Eris's had, as if there were no gravity, and she had black eyes with no center. She had a long face with high cheekbones and dark brown lips. Her skin was dark grey as if she'd been an ethnic woman like Uma before someone had
sucked every amount of pigment out of her skin. She was wearing a dress that looked like a woman's Halloween witch costume, with a ridiculously high collar and a long, sweeping skirt. If he listened, he could hear sand scraping on the ground. And she looked at Ben like he was prey instead of a person.

She laughed a freezing laugh that sounded like clattering rocks and, to Ben's horror, dissolved into sand, exactly like Eris had. She reappeared at his side, where she drew a delicate finger across the sensitive area where his shoulder and upper arm muscles met. An itch arose under the skin as she examined him. She met his eyes and all he could see was danger in them.

"Please don't." He commanded, pulling away as best he could. "I'm a married man."

The sand woman tilted her head and chuckled. "I see." She said. She examined the ring on his finger distastefully, as if its very presence offended her. "Pity to be married so young." She trailed off with a smile.

Ben made a crease in the corner of his mouth. "I actually consider it an achievement." He shrugged as he tried to shy away from her long fingers.

She watched the muscles move in his arm with a crazed light. "You're strong, babe." She whispered as she rose up, moving her mouth closer to his ear.

"Not babe," Ben corrected her with a hard look. "Only my wife calls me that. Not you." It was, he considered briefly, the first time he hadn't reacted to that word without at least a blush.

The girl took hold of his upper arm again and began to trace the fingers of her right hand down his chest as she leaned against his shoulder. "Your wife will probably die eventually." She purred. "If you love me, we could last forever."

Ben wasn't quite sure how she planned to do that. Maybe she had powers over time and aging. Maybe she was undead and talking about making him the same. Either way, he doubted her honesty and wanted no part in her offer. Ben scoffed and turned away. "I'd rather die tonight than go an hour with you," He informed her as a muscle tightened in his jaw.

She took a tight hold of the front of his shirt underneath the armor and leaned her face close to his. He could smell hot sand and smoke coming from her breath. "I think you're underestimating my offer," she hissed, pulling on his collar. "Think carefully. You're about to reject something very precious from someone very powerful."

"Precious yet unprofitable for me," Ben shook his head. "I don't want anything you have to offer."

"You've already seen samples of my power. You've seen my storms and I know you've heard of the things I do. What does your wife have on me?" She shook her head and released his shirt only to spread her fingers and run them down his arm to where his hand was. He squeezed his fingers together as best he could. He couldn't withdraw, but that didn't mean he'd make it easier for her to take his hand. "I'll give you a hint," She whispered, pressing her fingertips to his with a soft, sultry smile. "My name is Helena. And my last name? It's carved on the bones your side loses."

Troy. Oh dear. Troy. He looked at the ceiling and exhaled. "So, you're the reason everyone's dying?" he asked.

Helena giggled. "Just practice." She held up a hand and five small sandstorms appeared on the tips of her fingers. "See? Magic."

"I'm familiar with it." Ben pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. He was in so much trouble.
Helena giggled and ran a hand down his side to rest on his hip. Her thumb strayed further towards the center of his body. "You would be. Just look at you."

Ben leaned away from her. "So, where do the bones come from?" He asked.

Helena examined his features appreciatively, and he wondered if he'd heard her correctly. Then she chuckled. "I get to practice, we feed the bodies to Eris's bird. Roc can't digest the bones, so we use them to strike fear. But you don't want to talk about that. The sandstorms vanished as she threaded her fingers through his hair. "I want to talk about you."

She was leaving sand in his hair. Gritty, itchy sand. Ben pulled his head away as far as he could. "I'm sorry." He shook his head. "But I don't want anything to do with you." He let out a little laugh. "Unless you're going to let me out."

"I might," She cooed. "I'd let you out. You could be a king of sands with me. With your country's forces on our side, we could conquer this land and you could rule the entire world." Helena leaned up and pressed her lips to his cheek. He flinched back as she added: "With benefits."

Ben swallowed. Outside of Mal, he'd never had anyone come onto him this hard. Not even Audrey had tried. "I already have Mal," He told her. "And she's the most amazing person in the world. The things she does..." He trailed off, but couldn't stop an amazed smile creeping onto his face.

"Like what?" Helena asked with a deep frown. His rejection seemed to offend her far more than she was letting on. She dissolved again and floated up onto the wall above him, where she rested her arms around his neck as Ben shivered. "She doesn't sound very impressive. Is she magical? Is she the daughter of a villainess? Could she kill a man?"

Ben swiveled his head around to stare Helena down. "Yes." He answered firmly. "But she can do more than you'll ever be able to do. She can punish a friend and forgive an enemy in the same breath. She can be harsh and compassionate to a wrongdoer within the same minute. She is strong enough to bury her mother and weak enough to let me help her. She can grow horns and wings and spell anything, and you don't have anything on her." He shook his head disapprovingly at her.

Helena scoffed and dissolved a third time to reappear at his feet with her arms trailing down his chest. "If she can do all that, why would a bit of sand hurt you?" She smirked. "You're not afraid of her, are you? I'd protect you if she came after you."

Ben felt anger flash through his eyes the same instant he opened his mouth. "You talk a big talk," He whispered. "But I answer to one queen. And she's far better than you." He told her.

Ben knew immediately that he shouldn't have played that card. Helena looked hurt for a second, and then her face twisted with rage before she schooled herself into an unseemly calm. She withdrew her arms. "Fine then," She said in a level tone. "Have it your way."

She started to turn away, and then looked back over her shoulder at him. Suddenly, his chest was stinging. In a flash, she'd spun back on her feet, lunged, and attacked him. Ben barely had time to yell in surprise as her nails grew into long, sandy talons. She raked her hands off the bottom of his left cheek, down his neck, and sliced directly through his armor to rip through his torso. Ben roared in pain as every fiber of his body began to scream at his brain: pain, pain, pain. Blood began to soak through the wounds. He felt like he was on fire.

"You said you'd rather die tonight than be with me an hour, right?" Helena asked as she cleaned a bit of his skin out from under her nails nonchalantly. "Have it your way. It won't be tonight, but rest assured you'll die a long, painful death."
Ben looked down in horror at the wounds on his chest. Blood seeped through but was already starting to slow. The wounds were not deep and would heal under normal circumstances. What suddenly had Ben worried, however, was not the blood or the wounds. It was the black sand that was starting to appear in heavy clumps to stop the bleeding in place of normal clotting. Ben's body began to spasm in pain. His eyes stayed locked on the sand piling in odd clumps on his chest, trying to comprehend them, until his brain could take no more and he knocked out against his restraints. Helena walked towards the door and didn't bother to lock it behind her. It'd be less than a week, and then King Benjamin Florian Benson would be no more.

Mal shut the door hard against the protestors from New Orleans who had decided to come up to complain to her during her lunch break and locked the door before slamming her forehead against the door. She pushed her half-finished sandwich onto a side table as she went into the bathroom and plugged the sink without a word.

Most people had reacted well to her snap-back. Everyone who had conducted investigations at her had posted their results, and she was technically safe from being randomly stopped unless people started creating bogus evidence to try and prosecute her. Belle was speaking to her in soft terms, mostly acting like she was completely incapable, while Adam stayed away, hoarding everything she let him touch and saying nothing to her. That was fine. He could be mad all he wanted. She was still the Queen.

She filled the sink with warm water and put her hands under the stream. Her bruised fingers celebrated and agonized under the change of temperature and the pain waves running through Mal's head almost made tears prickle into her eyes. "Don't cry," She commanded herself. "You never cried once before Ben, and you don't need to be crying so much now."

She stopped the water and reached for some lotion on the counter. Then, from the other room, she heard the door click and the sudden shouts of people in the hall echoed into the room. It quickly stopped and she heard the door relock.

Someone had opened the door. Someone was in her room.

Ben had a key, didn't he? He and Lumiere, except Lumiere didn't use his and-

Mal practically jumped to the doorway, gasping for breath a little as she focused on the person at the door. Her heart dropped to her toes when she realized they were wearing pink, not blue.

"Audrey?" She asked, rubbing the lotion into her fingers with a wince as she walked to the pink leather-clad lady.

Audrey looked up, gasping for breath, and rolled her eyes. "I never realized," She huffed, "How demanding Auradon is."

Mal laughed. "You're telling me," She chuckled. "How did you get in?"

"Picked the lock," Audrey shrugged. "Evan showed me how." She held up a fistful of tools – tiny clamps, hooks with jagged barbs and twisted edges, and a credit card. "Took me a moment, though. Everyone was screaming at me." She began to tuck things into her pockets – she had shaped pockets for everything now – and exhaled. "I need to talk to you about the Isle," She explained.

Mal groaned and turned around to go back to hiding in the bathroom. She pushed the stool up to the bar as Audrey walked over and braced her hands on the door frame as she watched. Auradon
"Listen, I know things are heavy right now, but this is also a request from Evelyn, Eliza, and your
dad," Audrey explained, watching Mal sit down, put her elbows on the table and cover her eyes.
Her eyes spotted the sink full of water. "You, uh, weren't gonna try and drown yourself in that,
right?" She chuckled dryly, but her worried tone gave away her concern. Mal couldn't believe
things had gotten to the point that people thought she might try and die.

"No," Mal shook her head, rubbing her forehead and avoiding her reflection in the mirror. "No, I
was gonna try and call Ben."

"With the water?" Audrey asked.

Mal nodded, examined the full sink, and then prodded the surface with her finger. "Ben," She
demanded. The surface turned silver and took on an opaque, semi-solid look. Audrey took a few
steps forward to look over her shoulder in interest, but the water lost the color and returned to its
original state. A frown creased Mal's mouth. "He's not near any water," She sighed, running her
hands through her hair. "He hasn't called in a few days now."

"I'm sure he's okay," Audrey assured her, setting a hand on her shoulder. "Did he mention he was
going anywhere?"

"No," Mal shook her head, closing her eyes against the bright lights. "He's probably just busy." Or
maybe hurt, though she doubted it. Jack Frost would have told them if anything was wrong. She
got the feeling he was afraid of her. Maybe someone had stolen his basin, or it had been broken in a
battle? She had no idea.

Audrey cleared her throat. "Well, uh, your dad wanted me to check up on you, and… we have
questions. Can you spare us five minutes of thought?"

Mal kept her eyes closed. She had barely been able to give herself five minutes of thought all day.
"Yeah, what is it?" She asked.

"Are you ever going to let people come from the Isle to Auradon?" Audrey asked, crossing her
arms and leaning into the counter. "Because, like, everyone's grateful you've made everything so
much better, but people are wondering if they'll ever be able to go to Auradon."

A million thoughts filled Mal's head. She knew the Isle was years ahead of where it had started, but
it still wasn't perfect, and tiny compared to Auradon. She couldn't handle a mass exodus to
Auradon without having a population collapse and being forced to hand the Isle back to Auradon.
And while she knew some Auradonians were curious about the Isle, she knew that there wasn't
enough to promote people defecting to Isle Life. Magic was definitely an incentive. No stealing,
guaranteed housing… She sighed.

"Not yet," She mumbled, knowing that she was effectively saying the Isle would continue to be a
prison for the time being. "We need more stability on the Isle. Systems and housing and an
economy."

"Your dad wants to be able to visit you," Audrey replied flatly. "Wouldn't it be easier to have him
around while Ben is gone and you're stuck here?"

"I'm not stuck!" Mal snapped. "I'm leaving for the moorlands tomorrow!"

"Oh, good, you can leave the country while everyone else stays where they are," Audrey examined
her nails as the cutting remark took Mal's breath away. "Have you considered that some of them
still have connections in Auradon? Evelyn hasn't seen her brother in, like, thirty years. He has kids and is married and she's never even met his family. Robert Callahan's daughter is fifty now, with grandchildren, and let's not even mention how you told Anastasia you'd find her husband and how you haven't even updated her with any news."

Mal covered her face. She'd forgotten about Anastasia. Again.

"Not to mention," Audrey continued, "People in Auradon might want to visit the Isle and set up businesses and shops and things. Are you going to let Auradon go back and forth while Islanders have to stay put?"

"No," Mal denied. "No, no, Auradonians have to stay where they are as well. I can't run a ferry system on top of all this other… bull crap." She waved a hand as a piercing headache began in her head.

"Then what about me?" Audrey asked softly. "Am I your exception? You'll bend the rules so your friends can come and go, but everyone else has to stay put?"

Something inside Mal snapped and she snatched the bottle of soap on the counter and hurled it at the ground. It exploded into foam. "My father is on that island!" She snapped. "My father and Evie's brother and everyone! I'm trying to maintain a balance, Audrey!"

Audrey flicked a bit of foam off her sleeve. She looked disappointed. "You can't keep everyone locked separately, Mal. You have to have a balance before you can maintain one," She reprimanded.

"I can't focus on that right now," Mal grit her teeth. "When Ben is back, he and I-"

"I can't believe you're going to be the girl who needs her husband to do things!" Audrey interrupted. "I thought you might be getting over that when you dropped those new laws, but you're still waiting on him for permission, aren't you? Get this, Mal, Anastasia has lived without her husband for thirty years, and she doesn't need him to pick up her slack." Audrey crossed her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow at Mal. "You can't live without Ben for a month, but she's done it for thirty years and you're willing to keep her waiting." She held out a hand and began counting on her fingers. "And Dizzy, even though she's always wanted to walk through the castles and see the crowns. Evan, even though his sister is already enrolled in the school he wants to go study biology at. You'll even keep your father waiting, who's worried sick about how you're destroying yourself up here and keeping secrets from him. Don't think he's not well aware that something big is happening. Something you're not happy about."

"I am happy about it," Mal lied through a gasp, pressing a hand to her stomach. Her fingers curled inwards on instinct like she was going to try and claw herself again. "And I told you, I need time. We need to have more-"

"No," Audrey shook her head. "You don't need more time. You need to have more faith in your people." She pushed herself off the counter and stepped over the mess of foamy soap. "Hope Ben calls back to talk some sense into you," she sighed half-heartedly as she left the bathroom. Mal listened to the sound of the girl unlock the door and slip out. The explosion of sound made her eardrums ring before the knob clicked back into place, and she was alone again. Guilt, exhaustion, and torment were weighing down on her head. Audrey had always been full of one-liners. Full of clever words that cut straight to the heart. Mal had forgotten.

The lights suddenly turned red. Mal looked up, squinting in confusion at the bulbs. She twisted her hand, and the pale undertones looked almost grey in the light. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Like
her chest was constricting. She put a hand to her sternum and wheezed. Everything was working – why did it feel like it wasn't?

She pushed the chair away, curled into a ball on the floor, and covered her face from the bloody lights. 'A panic attack', she realized. 'It's not there. The lights aren't red. You can breathe, you can breathe, you can breathe.'

But sitting all alone, it really felt like she couldn't.

Audrey returned home to Auroria to spend time with her parents after having Lumiere page the Isle. She must have gotten the rundown on 'Mal turned Adam into the Beast', but Mal couldn't bring herself to care. She managed to return to work after an hour sitting on the floor, when her fingers felt like frozen sausages and her eyes were rimmed with black that wasn't eyeliner and she was only wheezing on every third breath.

Evie called late that night. Mal gathered up everything and balanced her phone on top as she left the office and headed down to the dining room where dinner was being served. She felt like she was holding herself together by ignoring everything going on in her head and praying nothing else happened to set her off. It was the last night she would spend with Belle and Adam before she headed to the moors for the month. Down in Auradon, children were trick-or-treating as part of an Auradon holiday known as Halloween, which she'd missed last year in the moors.

Mal shuffled the phone to her other ear as she opened the door to the dining room and waved to Adam and Belle. "That's great about your classes, E." She smiled. "You're taking care of yourself, right?"

"Yeah," Evie said. "What about you? Are you holding up?"

"I'm managing," Mal lied, setting down the paperwork. "A bunch of people came to complain to me today. New Orleans, Weselton, Zootopia... even Audrey came to ask about the Isle."

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. Then Evie whispered: "I meant about the baby, Mal. What's going on? Have you thought about where they're going to be? Are you thinking girl or boy? Because I have a few designs I've been working on but-"

"I haven't been thinking about it, Evie." Mal cut her off. A dark cloud was further descending over her mood. "They'll probably be in the room next to Ben and I's area though. I just... have not been dwelling on it too much, is all." She picked her words carefully, knowing Belle and Adam were almost certainly listening in.

"Aren't you excited?" Evie asked. "I know things must be hard with Ben so far away."

"I don't know and... I'm really stressed out," Mal told Evie as she snitched a small handful of blueberries and walked to the window to finish her conversation. "But it's okay. I'll figure things out." She glanced at Belle and Adam, who were holding hands and whispering in the shadows. "Hey, E, I've got to go now and get to dinner. Can I call you later?"

"Yeah." Evie agreed. "I'm going to get started on this chemistry assignment. It's throwing me for a loop."

"You should call Doug," Mal advised. "He finished college a few years ago. Maybe he'll have notes or something."

"I don't know," Evie hummed. "I mean, when we met, he was sweet and really, really into me, but I
"I'm not suggesting you marry him or anything, E." Mal snorted. "Just that you call and ask for help. Just keep it cool and calm."

Evie sighed. "Thanks for the advice, M."


"Bye," Evie confirmed. The phone clicked and Mal brought her now silenced phone down from her ear. She tucked it into her pocket and turned back towards the table.

"I'm sorry about that." She apologized to the former king and queen. "Evie was telling me about school."

"How is she?" Belle asked with a smile.

"Well." Mal shrugged. "A little overwhelmed though. She took a lot of courses and being on the Isle left her a little behind anyway. She's catching on though."

"That's good." Belle nodded. Adam leaned over and prodded Mal's work with a finger.

"I see you brought work to the table." He mumbled.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. "I'm not planning on walking back to my office. I'm just going to do my work in bed and let a movie play in the background."

Belle nodded and took a bite of her meal. The door swung open to reveal Sophia, holding a brown paper envelope with a thick black script on it. "Pardon me, your Majesties," She called with a smile as she swept into the room. "This just arrived from up north. Addressed to the Auradon Royal Family." She handed it to Belle with a smirk and a flourish. Belle picked the paper up and sliced the opening. She unfolded it and began to skim as Adam and Mal waited to see what it read.

After a few seconds, all of the color drained out of Belle's face and Mal's heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. Belle pressed a hand to her mouth as she finished the letter and lowered her hand, which quivered like she was shivering.

"What is it?" Mal asked.

Belle handed the letter to Adam without a word. Adam skimmed it and whispered: "God almighty."

Sophia's smile had long since faded. She walked back to hover over Adam's shoulder as she read over his shoulder. Her expression grew grave as she looked worriedly at Mal.

Mal scrunched her eyebrows together and pinched her lips. "Is anyone going to answer me?" She asked, growing more and more agitated.

"Mal," Adam straightened his back as his expression grew stern. Mal narrowed her eyes at his hostile, formal attitude. Adam caught her look, exhaled, and relaxed slightly, just enough to deliver his message without a growl.

"Ben has been captured," He told her. "Eris and Pitch Black have demanded Auradon's surrender in exchange for his return. No mention of his safety or condition."

Mal's face closed off and her eyes lit up in a glare so fierce that sparks began to fly from her irises.
For a second, she was back on the Isle, feeling the ground open up beneath her and wondering what on earth she was going to do without him. She thought she might throw up. Then her feet hit the ground again and the answer appeared in her grasp. Anger filled her as thousands of ideas appeared in her head.

"We refuse their offer of surrender," She said in a calm, piercing tone. "Sophia, fetch Audrey please." She nodded at her first Auradonian friend. "If you see Lumiere, I need him to deliver a message to the moors. I'll leave within the hour." Sophia stared for a second, picked up her skirts and brushed her black hair back behind her ears. She nodded in determination.

Belle and Adam exchanged surprised looks. Sophia moved to the door and opened it as Belle stood up. "Where are you going?" She demanded as Sophia disappeared from sight.

"The overland," Mal answered. The words solidified her decision. She grabbed a small bowl of assorted fruits and stacked her papers on top of it before she began to head for the doors. In her head, she was already planning what she needed. The car keys would be in Ben's car down in the garage. The palace wasn't particularly big fans of weapons aside from the firearms the guards wore, but Mal didn't know how to fire a gun properly, so she'd have to forego them. Ben's Auradon Prep katanas had gone north with him.

"Now, hold on!" Adam protested in a strangled tone as he grappled with the tablecloth in stunned unsteadiness. "You can't just walk out! You have two kingdoms to run; three counting Ben's because you're the next in line for that throne! You're pregnant with the next heir to the entire kingdom and our grandchild! Ben wouldn't want you to go! If both you and he die, then-"

Adam was cut off by Mal pulling the door open. "Then Ben and I will have died together, as is right." Mal snapped. She caught the heavy door with her foot and continued: "And you'll put Madison on the throne when she comes of age. Everything will be fine."

Mal shouldered the heavy wooden door and forced it open with her elbow. Adam pushed his chair back from the table in a smooth motion that moved the table away from the chair instead of the other way around. He followed her to the door and began to holler: "You can't just run off; you're with child!" Mal winced and wrapped a hand around her midsection. Didn't she know it? How could she forget? "Auradon needs at least one of you, and you don't even know where he is! Mal, sooner or later, you have to accept you have responsibility for the kingdom and you can't always be hurrying away. You can't leave to run off and save him! I forbid it!"

She stopped in the hall with her heart hammering in her chest. Forbid her? Adam? She supposed she'd been right to assume the day would one day come. Mal grit her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut. She could obey. She could change her mind and her plans and her attitude. Unfortunately, she wasn't one to change who she was. She didn't have time to argue with them - she had a job to do.

Mal spun around with a vicious sneer imprinted on her mouth. The blood levels in Adam's cheeks took a sharp detour for sub-par as he took in Mal's angry expression and realized what he'd just said. Mal's lips formed her response before the sounds escaped her mouth. "Watch me." She hissed and turned on her heel. The sounds of her shoes clicking on the floor faded to naught as Mal took her leave.

Adam sank to the cold stone floor, completely distraught. "Oh, Belle!" He mourned as the queen made her way to his side. "Oh, Belle!" Adam repeated. "What shall we do now?"

The creaking of the garage door opening nearly sent Mal into another migraine, but she managed to hold herself together as both she and Audrey watched the frost on the driveway appear outside.
Soon enough, she'd be free. She opened the back door and put a stack of things – her coat, food, and a knife – onto the seat. "I need you to cover the Isle for me while I'm gone," She announced, putting a foot up on the car to pull the laces tighter. "I should be back relatively soon."

Audrey chuckled and held her arms out for a hug. Mal quickly gave her a one-armed hug. "I guess we really are going to sic the queen at the villains then, huh?" Audrey laughed.

Mal sighed and shook her head. "I don't know yet. I don't know if I can do all this anymore."

"Just don't bite off more than you can chew," Audrey suggested, taking a not-so-subtle look at Mal's stomach. "You've got people besides Ben and yourself to think of too."

Mal nodded. "I know." She agreed with a sigh. "I'm not going to let any of them down either." She stepped up to the car, fumbled in the center console, and then turned the keys in the ignition.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to Belle and Adam?" Audrey huffed.

"They know I'm leaving." Mal shrugged. "And it's not goodbye for good. I'm going to come back, and this grandkid of theirs will be just fine." She pulled out her phone and began searching for the northernmost city in the country.

"I'll hold you to that promise." Someone called from the entrance into the garage. Mal had to duck out of the car to see Belle and Adam standing in the doorway of the garage. A small basket filled with snacks was tucked under Belle's arm as she left Adam's grasp and journeyed the short distance to the car. She handed over her small treasures and then pulled Mal into her tight embrace as brown curls fell into her brown eyes. "We trust you to do what's right." She said. "I know you'll bring everyone home safe."

"Always," Mal nodded.

Adam lumbered up behind Belle. He stared for several seconds at Mal like he suddenly wasn't sure what to make of her. He put his hand out, and Mal took it curiously. Adam cleared his throat. "I, I worry for you, but I know you're capable." He exhaled. "There is no one I'd rather have for my daughter-in-law."

Mal's eyes suddenly stung with tears. She hopped out of the car and carefully buried herself into Adam's larger frame. He wrapped his large, strong arms around her and softly kissed her head. His scent reminded Mal of Ben. Mal wiped at her eyes as they detached. "Ugh," Mal mumbled as she scrubbed her lashes. "Is it still too early for me to blame this all on Ben? Is someone cutting onions?"

Everyone laughed, and King Adam took hold of the door for Mal. Mal climbed in and fastened her seat belt.

"Be safe." Belle cautioned as Adam closed the door. Mal saluted them all and put the car in reverse gear. Everyone moved to watch as she pulled out and away, off to save her husband.

All through the night, Mal kept her eyes on the road as she sped through DunBroch, parts of Agrabah, and the Kuzkonian Empire. It started to pour as she neared the seashore, which really didn't seem fair. She parked the car at Kuzko's and rushed in to alert the guards to its presence. It was three a.m, which meant Mal had officially broken Audrey's record for terrible house-calling times, over Valentine's day and six-thirty a.m.

As soon as her car was taken care of, Mal rushed down to the seashore. She knew that Ben had
taken a train up to the shore before he'd somehow been transported to the overland. She had no idea where that train let out, or if there was anyone over there who would be able to take her to the overland. All she knew was that it was due north. However, she would lose all direction if she tried to fly over the waters with no lead. And she knew her feathery wings weren't nearly strong enough for that.

The answer was simple, of course. Magic. Mal knew that her mom had had the ability for near-instantaneous magical transport, but something told her she couldn't dissolve into smoke like her mom had been able to. Mal reached for her hair to twist a lock in thought and another idea immediately popped into her head: a dragon. Maleficent could turn herself – and others – into creatures of her liking. The dragon had become a specialty after her mom had turned Diaval into a dragon and then morphed herself years later when she was discovered alive. Her mom was almost known for just the dragon bit. If Mal could tap into her mother's magic, she might be able to summon the dragon skin that her mother had used so many times before.

And as for direction, she needed something on the overland that could lead her there. Something that she wouldn't lose track of. If she tried to use her phone as a compass, it would fall into the sea. She wouldn't be able to hold it. A beacon would work well, as would a magical… spell.

Mal's hands fell slack at her sides. Could it be all this time she'd spent trying to figure out how to cross the great waters could have been solved if only she'd acknowledged what had brought her to Auradon in the first place?

Mal closed her eyes and felt for the loosened strands of Maleficent's spell. It took almost no searching. There they were, forever spinning around her. The spell had been loosened, picked apart, and left in pieces. Mal used her physical hand to seize a portion of the damaged spell and examined it. She pulled it tight and felt the way the line stretched across the expanse of ocean in front of her, never breaking and never disconnecting from her other half. A blood anchor.

Mal let her eyes open again and smirked at nothing and no one in particular. She kicked the sand up around her feet and balled her fists up as she concentrated. It wasn't like she'd tried this before. The rush of something new – something freeing that would get her far away from Auradon and dignitaries and the Isle and problems – filled her. She'd do anything to get away. Anything to keep him alive.

A cold wind made every skin cell on her body stiffen. Mal began to shake but held her fists clenched. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she gagged as her body forced her head backward. Thick purple smoke with green sparks flickering through it appeared around her feet as quickly as if someone had dumped a bucket of fog over her toes. It turned into a whirling cyclone that rose up her body and covered her head. Mal felt her skin, bones, and everything, begin to morph. It was a hard feeling to describe, almost as if she were made of salt dough and someone was just pulling her small frame out to the proper size of a dragon. When the smoke subsided, and her vision returned to normal, everything appeared in green-tinted light. She could see farther around her head than she could normally and everything was much sharper. If she'd had her proper mouth, she would have smiled. She sought out the strand of the spell she'd held just a few minutes ago and let out a snort in triumph when she saw it as she felt it, a grey strand stretching across the ocean.

She spread her wings carefully, mindful of the trees around her, and gave two small, experimental flaps. Unlike her normal wings, these were scaly and more of a green color than her royal purple wings.

Mal heard shouts from nearby and hastily spread her wings as far as she could. She felt the wind coming in from the sea and lifted off. As people streamed onto the beach, she gained altitude and
began to soar off, over the sea of division, following her mother's ruined spell. Within seconds, the beach was out of sight.

These wings were much stronger than her others, but Mal already had a proclivity to her purple, human-sized wings. Ben had said he liked him, and he could still kiss her when she had those on. As a dragon? Not so much. But they served her purposes and refused to let her fall.

They were speedy too. Mal had no idea exactly how fast she was going, but the water was racing away behind her. She saw the occasional aquatic animal leap out of the water, but before it had even hit the surface again, she'd be a mile in front of it. She saw the island upon which the Great Forest stood and flew over it.

After a few more minutes of carefully propelling herself forward and following the course of the spell, she spotted something up ahead. It was white, shimmering, and strong. Mal narrowed her eyes. Not even a half-hour of flying and she was already at the barrier to all of Auradon. The barrier that apparently hadn't been telling Ben when Overland people passed through. Mal wondered what about their magic had made them invisible to the structure.

She hit the barrier full force and let out a snarl as she felt her claw catch before she gave three mighty flaps and the barrier released her with a whoosh. She shot forward like a bullet.

Over to her right, the sun was beginning to light the ocean. Beautiful pinks, oranges, and yellows filled the horizon as the dark skies began to flee west, to return in the evening. The growing daylight only made Mal more determined to make it. She put every ounce of strength she had into flying; every stroke had all of her strength behind it.

At long last, she felt the air change around her and breathed a sigh of relief. A bird flapped in the sky up ahead, meaning land wasn't that much farther. She pushed onwards in excitement.

What appeared like a bolt of lightning from out of the sky suddenly struck her left wing. Mal let out a startled squawk as she fell towards the sea below. She tried to flap her wing, but it had become completely entrenched in… ice?

Mal looked up and saw a figure with a crooked shepherd's staff floating above her. Oh no.

She put all of her energy into shifting as another bolt of ice spun towards her. The winds overtook her, and smoke appeared at her feet. Within seconds, she was looking at her human hands again.

Her purple feathered wings grew from her shoulders as she shielded her face from the sea spray hitting her as she fell. As they started to move and support her, her fall stopped. The bolt of ice soared past her as Mal blinked and cautiously looked up at the figure in the sky, who was zooming down to see where the rather large dragon had just disappeared to.

Mal stayed where she was as Jack Frost approached. When he saw her, his jaw fell slack. "Queen Mal?" He asked.

Mal nodded. "I hope you don't treat all Auradon guests like this," She drawled, enjoying the way he immediately respected her and didn't start lecturing her. "I'd hate to discover our soldiers are being mistreated."

Jack gripped her staff tightly. "I hope you don't treat all Auradon guests like this," She drawled, enjoying the way he immediately respected her and didn't start lecturing her. "I'd hate to discover our soldiers are being mistreated."

"Especially ones who can… conjure dragons?"

"Shapeshifting," Mal corrected him. "My conjuring isn't that great. I'm much better at working with what I already have."
Jack leaned on his staff with wide eyes. "O-kay," He nodded. "Auradon's queen can turn into a dragon. That's completely fine." He looked back at Mal. "What are you doing here, again?" He asked.

Mal crossed her arms. "I'm here to collect my husband." She informed Jack.

Jack winced. "Did you, ahm, miss the letter we sent you guys? About Ben? He was captured by Eris and…"

"I know," Mal nodded. "That's why I'm here."

"Mal," Jack started slowly. "I'm not sure you're entirely understanding the situation. Ben has been captured by the worst villain in the land and we have no idea if he's even safe. We don't even know where he is, otherwise, we would have already, ahm, collected him."

"I can find him." Mal waved her hand.

"No, Mal." Jack fluttered forward and grabbed her arm. "Eris has chaos sands, and Pitch Black has nightmare sands. They have a small colony of trolls who spy on our every move and they have a monster of a fighter named Tai Lung who can kill people within seconds and-"

"You're telling me all this and I don't see a problem." Mal scoffed, pulling out of his grasp. "I drove all night to be here and I taught myself to turn into a dragon so that I could fly across the entirety of the ocean, a feat only you have managed to accomplish to my knowledge. I know exactly how to find Ben and I don't care if Eris herself stands in my way, I will vaporize anyone who tries to stop me!" Mal turned midair and began her descent to the ground. Jack stayed and hovered for a few seconds before he followed her to the ground.

"If you can do all that, why did you stay behind in the first place?" Jack asked.

Mal smirked as more sparks flew from her eyes. She'd burned an awful lot of magic falling from her altitude level, and her lack of sleep and quiet was making her feel... wicked. "Oh, Jack." She laughed. "Don't you know being threatened brings out the worst in me?"

Jack, for the first time in many years, felt an uncomfortable cold creep down his spine. He shivered and flew in front of Mal to guide her to the ground.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Mal storms the overlands and meets Helena.

Chapter Notes

10 weeks till Christmas.

11 Weeks till New Years.

11 Weeks until we're done.

North, Sandy, Bunny, Hiccup, and Astrid all sat around a round, wooden table with dozens of maps littered across it. Unwashed, all sporting various small wounds, and staring blankly at either the mess of papers or the empty place where the King of Auradon should be. Above their heads swung a small candle chandelier with half of the Candleholders missing, making for a dim, sad light. The room was lined with dark, wooden panels. Astrid's hand slipped from underneath her chin as she shook her head.

Floorboards creaked outside. Then, the doors blew open with a gust of freezing air. Everyone looked up and stared as Jack landed inside the doorframe. "We have a visitor," Jack announced to the room as he walked inside. Hiccup and Bunny stood up while everyone straightened up. A figure in vivid purple stepped up to examine everyone. Mal crossed her arms and took in the room.

"Wow." She said after a long pause. "I feel like I'm back on the Isle of the Lost."

Hiccup and Astrid exchanged looks as they looked from Mal's still-sparking green eyes and dirty hands to her long, messy, purple hair.

North picked his sword up from where it lay propped against the table, with the blade digging into the floor. "Who is this?" He asked as he pulled a dirty rag out of his pocket and began to clean the blade.

"Her royal highness, Queen Mal of Auradon, the Isle, and the Moors," Jack announced as he floated lazily above everyone's heads. The Sandman, a round man with childish cheeks who wore a robe of golden sand, perked up and flashed a crown above his head, along with a question mark.

Mal waved her fingers at her companions as she stepped up to the maps and glanced briefly at them. "You can call me Mal." She drawled.

"I'm sorry," Astrid sputtered. "This is the Queen of the Isle, the Ancient Moorlands, and Auradon?"
"Yes," Jack nodded slowly as he landed. "And she's extremely powerful." He cast a sideways smirk to the purple-haired fairy. "Don't let the hair fool you."

Without glancing at him, Mal flicked her fingers from left to right and up and down in front of her head, and her hair braided itself down her back into a neat French braid that ended past her shoulder blades. No one spoke for several seconds as Mal examined the maps.

Bunny straightened up and unsheathed his boomerang. "So, what're ye doing here?" He asked with a low growl.

Mal looked up at him, clearly annoyed, and ignored the question. Instead, Jack cleared his throat. "She's come to rescue her husband."

North sighed. "I apologize, but we don't know where he is. He was captured off the dock in Syracuse, but has since been-

"I know where he is." Mal held up a hand to stop him. "He's about seven hundred miles from me, northwest. So, if we want to plot that here," She began to trace areas on the map with her fingers as she spoke, "he's about in the city you call Duloc." The miles were a rough estimate, but Mal was comparing the distance with places she knew of on her home continent. She assumed, based on examining the spell tying them together, that they would be the same distance apart if she were in the Moorlands and he was in Auradon City.

"Kingdom," Jack corrected with a curious look at Mal.

"Kingdom." Mal nodded as she examined the map.

"How do you know this?" North gestured at the map with a raised eyebrow.

Mal smiled. "National secret. Sorry. Anyway, he's here. Don't know if he's okay or dead or anything, but he's there. And now that I know where he is, I'll go fetch him." She turned and began to walk away from the room.

"Woah, Woah, Woah." Hiccup jumped up. "Just one second. I still have questions. How are you going to get him? That area is surrounded by Eris's troops and tons of monsters and baddies... We have no back up there at the moment. If you give us some time, we might be able to arrange something, but you'll be caught and killed for sure if you just head up. Also, we sent that letter like, early yesterday. No one has been down to help transport new soldiers from your land to our land, so how did you get here?"

"I flew," Mal declared shortly. She forced her hands to relax at her sides. Part of her was trying to reason with her that they hadn't interacted with her and were confused, but the greater part of her was fighting to get away quick.

"Flew?" Bunny asked.

"My question is why did Auradon send the queen when the king was just captured?" Astrid pinched her lips together as she examined Mal. There were brown blood spots in her blonde hair and a slash across her cheek. She looked distrustful of the teenager that was, apparently, the woman Ben had declared was even more powerful than he was.

"Auradon doesn't know," Mal admitted, struggling to keep the defensive growl out of her throat.

Jack's eyes widened. "Wait, wait, wait!" He exclaimed. "I assumed that you were sent by like, consensus. Are you seriously telling me Auradon has no idea where their king is and the pregnant
queen just up and vanished from the palace? Who's taking care of the kingdom?"

"My father and mother-in-law," Mal replied. The headache was banging into her skull again. Why couldn't they just trust her? Why was everyone always getting angry and acting like she had no clue?

"You're pregnant?" Hiccup asked. "Goodness gracious, what on the overland made you come here?"

"I'm sorry, is no one going to question that she can fly?" Bunny roared.

Jack was floating above the floorboards in anxiety. "Mal, being up here is way too dangerous! You should have stayed at the palace, not flown up here!"

Mal slammed her balled-up fist into the table. Too many people, too many questions, too much stress. "Quiet, now!" She demanded. "Believe it or not, I am very well aware of what happens if I die and I am very, very aware that there's a small person inside of me. What's next? Are you going to remind me that the sky is blue?" She pounded her finger into the table, ignoring the bruises on her hands as she did. "I drove all night long to make it to the coast, I've left all three kingdoms behind, I flew over that entire ocean and was shot down and still, you don't seem to realize how serious I am! I am here for my husband and I'll get him back no matter who tells me I should have just stayed home. I don't care if both Eris and Pitch are there themselves, no one takes my husband out except me!"

Everyone blinked several times. Magic sparked behind her eyes like some sort of broken lightning. Suddenly, the dirt on her hands looked less like the results of childish excursions and now seemed like the marks of a woman who'd dug into a task with both hands. This girl, despite her youth and abrupt nature, was a leader. And, almost as one, the room agreed to allow her to remain as such.

Hiccup raised a small, hesitant hand. "Are you talking about the date way or the death way?"

Mal scoffed. She shook her head and closed her eyes, then pushed herself off the table and put her hands on her hips. "I'm leaving now," She announced. "It'll take me about a half-hour to get there if I can get back outside in two minutes."

"How are you planning to jump seven-hundred miles in thirty minutes?" Bunny snorted.

"By flying." Mal rolled her eyes. She walked back to the door as everyone shuffled around the table and began to subconsciously follow her.

"Not even the dragons or the sleigh can fly that fast," Hiccup reasoned. "You might be able to take the warren tunnels. They're faster.

"Eris has the grounds mined," Bunny reminded Hiccup with a growl. "If I open a tunnel, it'll blow her sky-high."

"I'd rather fly." Mal smiled. "Makes a better impression anyways. Aha!" She took an abrupt turn and opened a set of doors to a balcony. "Shortcut." She nodded, approvingly. Everyone gathered behind her as she examined the ground, about fifty feet below her feet. Mal climbed up on the balcony as everyone took a sharp inhale. Jack floated out of the doorway and took to hovering off the balcony. Meanwhile, the Sandman floated behind North's hand, where he bobbed anxiously as he watched Mal stand on top of the railing and teeter back and forth.

Mal pitched herself off the balcony.

Astrid and Hiccup let out shouts as they rushed to the edge of the balcony. They barely had time to
jump back in surprise as a gigantic purple dragon shot back into the air past them. North dropped his sword as the Sandman hit the floor, his little sand cloud having disappeared underneath him in his shock.

"Oh, crikey," Bunny repeated over and over as they watched the dragon spread her wings and take off higher into the sky. A massive gust of wind whipped towards their faces and blew them back into the hallway. Bunny crashed into the wall as Jack blew straight into him and Sandy, leaving icicles hanging from both. Hiccup and Astrid, who had been knocked down when the dragon first took to the sky, were blown backward into North's knees, where they sat looking very surprised. North had barely managed to keep his footing. His dropped sword had blown into the hall and impaled its hilt into the wall a few feet from Jack, Sandy, and Bunny. Bunny grumbled as he got to his feet. He shook a paw in the general direction Queen Mal had vanished in. "Oh, rack off, ya bloody show-pony!" He yelled.

Hiccup turned and stared at everyone. "Are we not going to go after her?" He questioned in a high-pitched voice.

"Pssh," Jack laughed. "Do you want to, man?"

"She's going to get herself killed," Astrid said with wide eyes.

Bunny put two hands in front of him and gestured to the sky. "Is it – is it even possible to kill her?" He yelled in a crazed tone.

Jack took a sharp intake. "Let's… not test that idea." He suggested as he got to his feet and began to balance on the end of his staff. He laughed uneasily. "To think I was afraid of talking to the king without the queen… he's just a giant teddy bear and she's a full-on death machine."

The group helped each other up and went to look outside. The snow that seemed to follow Jack everywhere had been blasted clear off the mountainside when Mal had flown up. She'd cut through the overcast sky and moved the clouds to make a long, single cut through the sky. Hiccup sucked in a breath.

"Easy to track," He whispered.

"Hard to keep up with," Astrid muttered. They met gazes and smiled. "I'll get the dragons ready, you grab some weapons." She told Hiccup.

"Where are you two going?" North bellowed as the two young adults slipped past him and began to sprint after him.

"Sightseeing!" Hiccup yelled over his shoulder before they vanished from sight.

North, Jack, Sandy, and Bunny stared at each other. "I guess that's it," North muttered.

"Should we try to catch up?" Jack asked.

North considered. "You should go, Jack. We'll fight the sea of monsters for today. Go and see what help you can offer."

Jack nodded and shot into the sky without another word. A gust of cold wind came to carry him away and soon he, too, was gone.

After the first ten miles, the clouds became so thick that Mal's wings could no longer beat them
aside to reveal the sun. The air grew dark and misty. It smelled like Agrabah, which Mal had
passed on her way to the beach last night. Sand was everywhere – even in the sky. The entire
continent was a massive, pillaged wasteland.

Duloc looked like it had once been an amusement park before being repurposed into a city and
then being taken over with evil. One single building rose above rows and rows of little formerly
white houses with blue roofs.

Mal circled the city once, twice, let out a roar or two, and watched as slowly, one by one, all of the
lights came on in the little houses and the large palace doors opened. Mal circled around and
landed in the middle of everything – right beside a tiny stand reading 'information' which had large
cracks running through it.

A crowd gathered as people emerged from their houses, murmuring and then shouting in alarm as
they saw the dragon. From the open palace doors, Mal saw a long shadow stretch out across the
courtyard. She shifted back – it was a little harder without the immediate death threat – and people
shouted as the purple dragon went up in green smoke and left a young woman standing in the
center of the courtyard with a wide area around her.

"It's a sorceress!" Someone shouted.

"No, a shapeshifter!" Another called.

"She's an invader!" A cool, cold voice corrected them. The crowd parted – there were about five
hundred people in all and they all stepped aside as the shadow from the foot of the castle grew into
a volumizing sandstorm. There was a sound like an avalanche going uphill, and black sand whizzed
through Mal's legs. She wasn't to be intimidated. She watched as a woman reformed in front of her.
It was Helena. Thick, dark, nightmare sand curled at her feet as she frowned at Mal. "How dare
you come here!"

Mal put her hands on her hips slowly. "I'm here for my husband," She declared. "Are you holding
him?"

Helena laughed. "Hundreds of prisoners have passed through here and been disposed of. What
makes you think he's still here?"

Disposed of. Dead. The ends of Mal's hair caught fire. "If you've hurt him," She hissed, "then there
won't be enough mercy in the world to save you." Some of the citizens oohed while others shifted
uncomfortably. Smaller children were shielded inside of doorways and some people began to
retreat into their homes.

"Mercy?" Helena repeated, sounding as if she had never even heard the term. "What makes you
think we have any of that anywhere? You have no idea about me."

Mal bent down and scooped up a pinch of sand. This was the same structure of magic that Jack
had. Blockish. Specific. "Earth Mage," She sighed. "Your parents have two different powers.
What's your name?"

Helena straightened up. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," She trilled in a mocking
tone. Mal tilted her head as she began to chuckle. "My name is Helena Apate Troy."

Mal let the sand trickle through her fingers. Troy. There was something about that name…
something dangerous. And this magic… it was earth-based, like how Jack's was ice-based, but
Jack's magic was meant for something else. And this person, their power was weakness, fear, and
Mal met the eyes of her opponent. "That means nothing to me," She whispered. "And, it seems, my appearance means nothing to you. Maybe word of my marks haven't graced this land yet, but my name should. I am Mal, Queen of the Isle of the Lost and the Ancient Magical Moorlands. I fight for Auradon, and I'm about to pick a fight with you."

"The Queen?" Helena repeated. "You're the Queen? You're the person he said I couldn't compare to? Auradon sent their queen? So soon after losing their king? Hopefully, you last longer than he did. He practically gave himself up and then made the mistake of refusing me."

Something clicked in Mal's head. Sand magic. Fear magic. Jack Frost had described a man with the power of nightmares. A boogeyman. Someone who had the power to turn dreamsand, which she assumed worked like the name implied, against its use.

"Funny." She mumbled. "Jack Frost didn't mention you."

Helena's eyes flashed and the sand carried her straight up to Mal's face. "Jack Frost is a coward!" She spat.

"Maybe you're not important enough." Mal offered.

"I am the daughter of the most important villainess in the land!" Helena bristled. Her storm of sand grew windier. More people sought refuge away from the witch.

Mal pinched her lips together. The most important villainess in the land? "Eris, then." She realized aloud. "And Pitch Black, since you're so against Jack Frost."

Helena sank back. "What?" She asked, dumbfounded.

"Those are your parents," Mal responded. All of the pieces had clicked into place. "Eris and Pitch. Fascinating. A child like you would surely be known and spoken of by the leaders of the light side, so let me guess: they don't know you exist?"

Helena stomped up to Mal. She was taller than Mal by more than a few inches, forcing Mal to look up to keep eye contact. "Let's get something sweet here, little miss princess," She hissed. "I am important and the fact the world doesn't know about me means nothing. The light side fears me, and they don't know what I am capable of. You don't know what I am capable of. I am the daughter of the most important villains in the land."

"Me too." Mal cut off her rant. Helena looked shocked as Mal's words sunk in. Mal smirked and let her eyes go vibrant green as she backed Helena up down her own stupid street. "My mother is a very important villainess as well. If only she were still alive, maybe they could have gone head to head. My mother could have spelled yours to sleep for a thousand years before yours tried to flick some sand at her. As for my father, he's the God of the Dead. I think the name speaks for itself, don't you?" Mal brushed off Helena's shoulder, taking more sand away with her, and leaned in close. "You don't know what I'm capable of." She whispered and stepped back. "Go, gather whoever you want to fight me. I'm taking this place by storm in the next two minutes, so you'd better hurry."

Helena stumbled with wide eyes and sneered. "Bring your worst." She told Mal and vaporized into sand.

Mal rolled her eyes, even though Helena wasn't there to see it. "It'll just be me, sweetheart." She whispered.
Alarms began to blare in the city. People yelped and screamed and hurried into their houses. The largest building, whose doors were still open, shook. Mal squinted at it. It was several stories high and the entrance was wide enough for her to crawl into in her dragon form. And from inside, an army was emerging.

Mal watched an entire battalion of what appeared to be knights mounted on horses made of nightmare sand walk into the court area. They'd sent the mighty army of Duloc. Behind the army, the palace door shut and locked tight.

Mal cracked her knuckles as the leader of the horsemen screamed: "Charge!"

She spread her hands. All at once, the battlefield was lit in electric green flames. Her horns appeared in an instant – they usually did when she performed lots of magic. She let her eyes light up as the sky above began to swirl into a funnel, and then a bolt of lightning blasted the front lines apart.

Someone screamed, and the army scattered, leaving their weapons in their wake. Mal outstretched her hands and everyone's weapons melted out of their hands and straight into the ground. It would have been a wonderful show if she hadn't almost blacked out immediately afterward. The horses, it became apparent, were flammable. When they'd walked, they'd left sand behind, which now lit as easily as gasoline and fueled her flames without her command. The fire followed the horses to where they'd hid with their soldiers and people started to scream as houses, streets, and horses caught fire. Mal outstretched her hand to spare the homes with the people inside of them, but otherwise let the street burn.

She marched through the fire – with the flames licking her arms before remembering she was their mistress - to the palace doors and put her hand on the handle. She pulled, but it didn't budge. "Make it easy, make it quick; open up without a kick," She commanded. The doors were meant to open to the outside, but as Mal pointed, they blew off their hinges and landed on the opposite side of the wall before toppling to the floor inside of the entrance hall with a boom. Two people remained inside. One was Helena, the other a very short, ridiculous-looking man with long, black hair who was looking in horror at the scene outside.

He turned to Helena as he began to pull his hair out. "What have you done?" He cried.

"It's not me!" Helena protested as she jumped into action. A sandstorm began to form as she leaped into Mal's path. Helena put her hands one over the other. Brown light formed in her palm and sand materialized into a deadly blast weapon as Helena attacked Mal.

A blast caught her in the jaw and Mal could feel her back teeth being knocked out of place. She locked her jaw and braced her hands up for a fight. Just in time too, because another blast hit her hands. Her pained hands with the bruises and the strains from all the Auradon had been putting her through. Mal grit her teeth and fired back on impulse – a green beam of fire that crashed into Helena and set her afire before the girl drowned it out with sand. Interesting, because the fear sands caught fire so easily. Either Helena must not have inherited the fear sand specifically, or she must have inherited both to a certain degree. Were they mixed magics, like Ericka's and Jessie's? Or were they separate, and she could conjure both?

Mal flew up into the air and soared right over the next blast to crash into Helena. The other girl went down with a shriek but managed to pull Mal with her by her ankles. Mal crashed into a candle stand, which broke off into a pole as the short man screamed and hurried upstairs. Mal snatched the pole up and whirled to pin the other girl underneath it, but she once again called the sands to her will and the black sands slowed Mal's thrust. Mal watched as Helena called the sands to her and pulled something from the midst of the black. A long sword with a sharper tip than a blade, with a
golden loop guard around the blue leather handle and the Auradon crest in the center of the pommel.

A fire lit in Mal's throat as she launched herself towards Helena. "That's Ben's sword!" She yelled as she reared the pole and swung as hard as she could. Helena shrieked as the sword went flying out of her grasp. Mal held a hand out for the sword and called: "And now I command, sword to my hand!"

The sword had no sooner clanged against the wall than it was rocketing back to Mal's grip. Mal snatched it and examined the beautiful two-part guard with 'Benjamin Florian Benson' inscribed in permanent marker on the leather handle in Belle's handwriting.

Mal shoved the point of the sword up to Helena's throat. "Where did you get this?" She snarled.

Helena sneered. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Mal kicked Helena away from her and raised the blade over her shoulder. A strange sound from outside distracted them both. They looked outside as a shadow drifted over the houses. Tell-tale ice formed in his wake, putting out the green fires. Meanwhile, dark purple plasma blasts fell from the skies as regular, orange fire rained down from above.

Helena panicked and tried to attack with long, lethal spikes of sand. Mal sliced them off at the base, just like in Ben's favorite movie where the Big Hero Six team had sliced the microbots off at the ground level to send them into the portal. It didn't have nearly the same effect, but it was close enough. As Helena tried to flee from the room, Mal stomped down on her dress and pinned her to the floor. She grabbed the girl's collar and pulled her to a standing level. "Where is he?" She snarled.

Helena was so frazzled, she completely forgot she could dematerialize into shadows and sand. Instead, she just whimpered. "The King?" She cried as black tears started to pile in her eyes. "I don't know! He's gone! They move people when I'm done with them!"

Mal shook her. "Done with them!" She exclaimed. "You'd better hope I can cure whatever you've done, otherwise I will make you regret your entire existence." Mal snarled. Smoke billowed out of her nostrils. Helena shrunk back and began to cry inky black tears. "Tell me where I can find him," Mal whispered harshly. "And so help me, if he's gone, it will be the end of you."

A cold wind whipped into the room. Jack Frost hurried inside and stopped in his tracks when he saw Helena.

Helena's feet melted into the shadows. Mal suddenly lost her hold as the slippery girl began to fall directly into the shadows. The sand was siphoned away with her. Soon, she was gone. All that was left were three small stones that had been formed when Helena's tears hit the sand. Mal kicked them aside and they were lost in the cracks of the floor.

"Who in the overland was that?" Jack began to panic as he clutched his staff tightly. "She disappeared into the shadows just like... just like Pitch!"

Mal rolled her eyes. "So observant," She commented. "She can travel through shadows and by sand. I scared her out of her wits, but I need to find Ben before she thinks to come back."

"The city is on fire," Jack told her, even though it was pretty obvious with the flames going on outside. "I need to go help Hiccup and Astrid. Can you find him by yourself?"

"Of course I can." Mal waved her hand.
Jack took a few extra seconds to stare at her. "You know," he sighed dramatically. "You were a lot calmer when I first met you."

Mal picked up Ben's sword and carefully looked it over for damage. "I wasn't being threatened then," She replied.

Jack nodded his head from side to side like that made sense and took to the air again. He saluted her with an impish smile and returned outside. Meanwhile, Mal did her best to calm down and search for the line she'd been following for the last few hours. She took Ben's sword with her as she opened a door and found a staircase that went both up and down. After a moment's deliberation, she went up and began to stalk through hallways.

The building resembled a castle, with thick carpets on the ground and heavy portraits hanging on the walls. Each of the portraits depicted the same odd-looking, short man who had fled from the room. Under one of the plaques was the name 'Lord Farquaad.'

Mal stalked through every hall and opened every door. She worked on pure instinct as she went. The castle was empty. Mal had no way of knowing who had been in the castle before she had shown up, but she hoped it had been equally empty. All she could tell was that Ben was here.

Gradually, as she climbed higher, the rooms became old and shabby until suddenly the once lavish rooms turned into rows of bedraggled cells. Manacles that hung from the walls and slabs of wood that could be hung against the wall for beds and sitting were the only decorations strewn up here.

Mal stopped following the spell's faint residual path and relied only on her senses. She leaned against the stone wall with her fingers on the cold bricks. Like Beast's Castle, the walls spoke to her, giving her a short history. She listened carefully. Minutes passed before she heard anything. She was just about to give up and listening and continue her wandering when she heard the faintest of groans carried through the wall. She pushed herself to her feet.

One left, then another. A staircase, and then she paused again. Without putting her ear to the wall, she could now hear Ben as he muttered and groaned in pain. Mal set her jaw and marched down the hall. The cells came in shades of light and they came in shades of dark. After a while, they blended together in Mal's mind, so much in fact that she almost walked past the one occupied cell. She almost walked past the reason she'd come.

Ben's chin knocked against his collarbone with every ragged, painful breath. What had started as the heat of fire had only escalated into excruciating pain. Every nerve ending was begging his brain to take action. Whatever had been on Helena's nails was now sinking into him. He could feel the poison overtaking him.

Outside, a battle was raging on. He had no idea who it was, but he was pretty sure he'd heard a dragon, lightning, and screaming. Maybe it was Hiccup and Astrid and their crew. Maybe they'd arrive soon enough for Ben to give them something to tell Mal.

Ben could feel death creeping into his veins. It hurt. He didn't want to die. He had a kid on the way; a little prince or princess. He had parents and a wife waiting for him, and a kingdom that Mal didn't want to have to run for him. But it didn't look like he had much of a choice. Ben had watched in horror as, over the last day, piles of sand had built on the wounds over his chest, neck, and chin. His skin felt like it was beginning to wither away. The tips of his finger had no blood and were going grey, though he couldn't tell if that was a result of his chains or his steadily-failing circulation.
The door to the cell clanged open and he groaned as he slumped forward, defeated, into his bindings. It must be Helena, come to mock him before he died. "Helena," He sighed. "Please, let me send a message to someone for my wife. I have things I need to tell her." It was the most reasonable last request he could think of.

He heard soft footsteps heading towards him, which struck him as odd since Helena had traveled with the sound of sandpaper. Small, soft hands took his face. He felt sparks at the end of the newcomer's fingers that sank into his skin and left a feeling like ice kisses on his face. "Why don't you tell her yourself?" Someone whispered as they pressed a soft kiss to the side of his nose.

Ben screwed up his eyes and found the strength to force them open. A vision of purple swam before his retinas. He blinked several times until he was able to make out who it was. "Mal…" He whispered as her fingers continued to caress his face and trail through his hairline.

She was frowning. She looked angry. "What did they do to you?" She hissed as her fingers slipped on top of the sandy wound on his chin. Ben hissed, and she stilled.

"Scratches," He mumbled. "How… are you real?" She looked like an angel. Could it be Eris, fooling him again? How would she know what Mal looked like? It must be her.

Mal's eyes softened. She moved her mouth up to his and began to kiss him. Her lower lip caught the cut on his chin as she did so, and he winced but leaned desperately into her. She didn't kiss him for long though. She pulled away with a disgusted look.

"Your mouth… reeks of magic." She explained, which settled the fact of who she was. She carefully laid her hands on his face and examined his chin. "Is this… sand?" She whispered.

"Helena." Ben coughed suddenly. Black sand appeared on the corners of his mouth, which Mal wiped away with a hard look. "Helena scratched me and did something," He whispered. He coughed again, trying his best to turn away from Mal as his lungs forced sticky, black sand out of his lungs. He did his best to spit it all out onto the floor, but he could feel sand lining his gums and scratching the back of his throat. "How did you get here?" He whispered. "I've only been here a few days."

"I flew," Mal explained in a tense tone. "We need to take you straight to Fairy Godmother." She stepped back. "Toad's breath and vampire's tickle, open up these locks a little!" She hissed. The locks all opened as one, and suddenly Ben was free-falling into Mal's arms. She caught him, struggled a moment under his weight, then whispered: "Take a break; you're feather-weight."

Ben's body grew lighter, though the combination of Mal's magic with whatever was already in his body was making his head feel like it was full of cotton. Mal carefully lowered him onto the floor. Ben cried out as he moved his neck. "Ouch! Ow, ow." He bit his tongue.

Mal quickly examined the area. Her face grew a little pale. "Oh no," She whispered. "It's on your neck too? How far did she get you?"

Ben's hands were numb and his fingers had turned grey and were immobile, but he did his best to gesture to his ribcage. The marks ended with the last of his ribs. Mal began to peel off his armor, inch by inch. Ben cried out. The bloody sand had glued his armor and undershirt to his body. Mal bit her lower lip as she worked at a painstakingly slow pace. Every jostle, every pull, caused Ben intense pain. The sounds of battle outside slowly faded as she worked. It felt like many painful years had passed before Mal finally worked the right half of the armor off of Ben's skin. When she saw what was underneath, she turned so he couldn't see the tears collect in her eyes.
Black steam wafted off of his wounds and dissolved into the air, resulting in a smell akin to rotten milk. The skin around the scrapes had festered and turned green. Entire layers of skin peeled off and stuck to his undershirt like they were part of the fabric. Streaks of dark, fiery red ran across the skin and stretched toward his back like burns. Mal swallowed bile and then turned back to inspect the wound. "Blood poisoning," She diagnosed. "I saw it on the Isle. Harry Hook's younger brother... died of it."

"But with Magic?" Ben prodded.

"Don't say anything of the sort," Mal snapped angrily. "I lost my mother to magical poisoning and I won't lose you as well, so you might as well keep your mouth shut because I refuse."

As Mal tried to maneuver the rest of his shirt off, the skin split like a child pulling silly putty apart. Mal let out a string of Elvish words that sounded a lot like curses to Ben as he screwed his eyes shut. Sandy tears filled his eyes as sandy blood spilled out of the new wound that ran in between all of his ribs and down to his groin. Mal hastily pressed her hands as to the skin, trying to hold them together even as the skin withered before her eyes and took on an ashlike appearance. "To see you whole is my only goal; Come back and heal in body and soul," She commanded through tears.

What happened next can only be felt in the moment, and never described hereafter.

A horrible pain arched through Ben's body. He yelled and spasmed. His arms and legs took on a life of their own as they flailed, and Ben's head split along the crown so that blood, thick with sand, began to pour down into his eyes. Mal whipped her hands away as Ben writhed in absolute agony. "Stop, stop, stop!" She screamed, staring at her hands in horror. The spell had failed, the spell had failed. Ben, who was still conscious despite the pain, couldn't turn away from her. The fear in her eyes was palpable. She was horrified with herself. As much as knowing he was days - maybe hours - away from death, it hurt more knowing that this moment would haunt her for years as the first time her magic had lashed out and hurt someone without her intent.

"S- issa okay." He slurred. His fingers didn't work, but he tried to put his hand on top of Mal's. "Les jus no do tha til we see Fai Go'mo'er." He tried to speak. Bitter tears started to fall from Mal's eyes.

"I'm sorry..." She whispered, shaking her head. "I should have been here sooner, I should have been here."

Ben couldn't shake his head. He couldn't even move his neck. But he focused on moving his lips, and silently mouthed the word: "No."

Mal sniffled and looked back at the remnants of his shirt and armor. She carefully pulled them back into their original place, hoping that the sandy bleeding would stop, and moved to cradle her husband's head in her lap as she tried to figure out what to do. She kissed his forehead as her tears fell onto the floor around them. Ben slowly, carefully moved his hands up above his head, though the wounded skin stretched and ached in protest, and rested his hands right up next to her stomach. Mal laughed at him as bitter tears fell even faster. "You're silly," She told him as guilt and bitterness joined the enthrall of misery inside of her.

Ben did his best to smile for her. He knew he probably had sand everywhere in his mouth and black sand now covered his head, but he tried nonetheless. "I thought you'd at least wait to get home before you undressed me," He teased. To his pride, his speech was already improving from his almost-seizure.

Mal chuckled a little as she ran her fingers through his hair, carefully avoiding the laceration on his scalp. It was clear she wasn't sure what to do or how to move him. He responded by rubbing his
numb knuckles up and down in a little vertical line about two inches from her belly button. "If only you were a little nicer to look at." She smiled.

"My wife doesn't think I'm pretty anymore," Ben mourned.

Mal giggled and leaned down to kiss his head. "You'll always be handsome to me," She assured him. She carefully laid his head back on the ground. Ben brought his hands back down. Mal bit her lip as she looked him over. "This will hurt, but I have to move you," She told him.

He nodded slowly. Mal took one arm and helped him put it around her neck. Then slowly, carefully, she slipped her arms underneath him and lifted him. Ben cried out. His entire ribcage felt like it was being eaten by a vicious beast with fiery claws and icy teeth as she carefully took him into her arms. As soon as he was secure, she began to walk out of the building. Down the numerous flights of stairs that she'd just climbed until she finally found the door into the entry hallway. Jack Frost, Hiccup, and Astrid were loitering inside, waiting for her. When Hiccup saw Ben, he turned around to be sick. Jack and Astrid too, looked very green.

"Jack, help me with him," Mal commanded. Jack jumped into action and hurried to Ben and Mal as they began to walk outside.

The city was desolate. The army had been destroyed. Mal could see no trace of either civilians or prisoners, though the houses looked mostly unharmed. Everyone was gone.

"Farquaad got away," Astrid informed them, following slowly. "Jack said another villain was here? A sand one?"

"A daughter of Pitch Black and Eris," Mal declared. "She's the one who did this to Ben."

"Troy," Ben coughed. He was barely coherent, but he had to make sure they knew. "She is Troy. She does this."

Jack coughed. "Troy?" He repeated. He and Astrid exchanged looks.

Mal turned to Jack with Ben. "I'm going to transform, and I need you to put him on my back. If you can, it'd be great for you to ride to Auradon with me. I'm taking him straight to our Fairy Godmother before anything else happens."

Jack held his breath as Mal passed Ben over. The smell of rotten milk wasn't letting up despite the open air. "I can do that," He agreed. Mal nodded and backed away several paces from them. She imagined Helena and Eris and Pitch and how she was going to make them pay for everything and felt the scales form on top of her skin. Her body stretched and morphed until she was about three stories taller than Ben, Jack, Astrid, and Hiccup. Hiccup, who had regained some color, was starting to catch up with the group. Ben didn't react much – he was falling incoherent.

Jack flew up to Mal's head and carefully laid Ben down on one side of the spikes running down her spine. Mal felt ice appear on her back as Jack used his powers to secure Ben to her. "He's good," Jack called after a while, which was a lie. "Let's go."

Without a sound, Mal leaped into the air. As she flew directly up, she parted the clouds, and sunlight broke through onto the overcast land for the first time in almost fifty years. Jack held on for dear life as Mal the dragon beat her mighty wings for a direct path to Auradon.

"Good morning." Carlos yawned as he strolled into Evie's room and waved hello at her roommates. He set an apple, a yogurt parfait, and an eclair onto her desk where she was sitting, reading the
morning news with a furrowed brow. "You're up early," He commented.

"Had to finish a project," Evie muttered under her breath as she scrolled.

"Mhm," Carlos nodded. "I was up until, like, midnight with the guys in our room. We were playing Hero's Duty for like, five hours." He laughed, pulled up a chair, and collapsed into it. Mavis, who was also a design major like Evie, turned over in her bed and pulled her pillow over her head.

"Did you finish your Electrical Engineering project?" Evie asked in a condescending tone. She still didn't look up from her phone.

Carlos wilted. "Well… it's mostly done," He mumbled. "I can finish it before it's due."

"Today?" Evie asked. "You have it first period."

"You're right," Carlos sighed. "I'll go finish it." He stood up and hesitated. "But first… what are you looking at?" He tried to crane his neck to look over her shoulder. Evie ripped her gaze from the phone screen and shoved a full-screen color photo into Carlos's face.

"The queen turned into a dragon off the Kuzkonian coast around four in the morning and promptly flew away, disappearing in under a minute and knocking down two trees with the wind from her wings," Evie informed him.

At her words, all of Evie's roommates sat up. Mavis looked like Anna in the Frozen movie, waking up with her black hair coiled in her mouth. Another girl rolled off her bed with a yelp and stumbled blindly to Evie's side. "Whaaa?" She yawned.

"I'm sorry," Carlos said, looking like he'd swallowed a plum. "Queen? As in Belle? Or one of the minor royals? Or, like, the queen, our friend the queen, Mal?"

"Do you know of any other royals who have the ability to morph into gigantic dragons with mile-wide wingspans?" Evie asked, annoyed.

"Mile-wide?" Carlos gasped. He examined the picture in shock. It was as Evie had said. An enormous dragon with gigantic wings almost as wide as the dragon was long. The photos were dark due to the early morning, but clear. "Since when can Mal turn into a dragon?" He asked.

"I don't know, who knows what she does at the moors?" Evie exclaimed, throwing her hands – and her phone – into the air. Carlos panicked and snatched it out of the air from underneath Evie's roommate's nose.

"Wait, I'm sorry, why is the queen leaving Auradon?" Her roommate blinked and rubbed her eyes.

"What?" Evie and Carlos snapped at the same time. Evie's roommate jumped back in surprise.

"Well, north? As in, where that new continent everyone is talking about is? Where the king is?" She trailed off.

"That doesn't make any sense." Evie pursed her lips. "Mal is due to leave for the moors like, thirty-two minutes ago. She didn't mention any of this when I called her last night. She's the only currently-coronated royal, and she's pregnant? Why would she up and leave for the Overland if-"

"Maybe Ben needed her?" Evie's roommate yawned.

Carlos and Evie stared at her.
"What?" She asked.

Carlos turned to Evie with a pointed finger. "That would do it!" He exclaimed. "Just like when Gaston captured Ben on the Isle!"

"Excuse me?" Mavis sat up in bed. "Beast's son… Gaston?!!"

"I'm calling Belle." Evie took her phone from Carlos and began to walk out of the room.

"You have Queen Belle's number?" Another girl sat up and stared at Evie incredulously as she opened the door and stepped out. The last thing they heard was her saying: "Hi Belle," as the door closed.

"We lived with the queen for over a month." Carlos rolled his eyes. "Now if you'll excuse me… I've got a project to finish." He hurried to the door as the three girls exploded into protests and came face to face with a red-eyed Jay, who was holding his phone up in a panic.

"Mal… Queen… Dragon!" He exclaimed with wide eyes.

Carlos threw his hands into the air. "Well, what do you expect me to do about it?" He yelled.

His voice echoed off the halls. Doors opened one by one, all the way down the hall. Tired college students peeked out. "What's going on?" Someone asked.

At the very end of the hall, a door banged open and into the wall. "The queen turned into a dragon and left the country!" Pocahontas's son Paco waved his cell phone in the air as his braids swung back and forth around his shoulders. There were about four seconds of silence, and then the corridor exploded into sound. Carlos pressed one hand to Evie's back and one hand to Jay's and marched them both out of the corridor quickly.

As Mal soared back within range of Auradon, news feeds all over Auradon and the moors began to blow up. She took a direct course over Kuzko's empire, the clan of Dun Broch, and circled the north mountain to make it back into classical Auradon. All in all, she probably passed over Auradon in forty-five minutes. Still, over two-hundred total minutes of footage on the gigantic dragon would appear on Auradon and the Isle's inter-web before the sun even went down.

Mal landed on the road in front of the palace as Belle, Adam, Lumiere, Sophia, Stewart, and about fifty of the royal guards rushed out of the palace to see what was going on. Jack Frost carefully removed Ben and flew him to the ground. Stewart and about thirty other men cocked their guns as Mal snorted at them all. One of the other guards had his phone out and was filming the entire encounter. She shifted back, much to the shock of many of the Auradonians, and rushed to Ben, who Jack had laid carefully on the ground. He was beginning to spasm and twitch occasionally in pain. Sandy black foam collected at the corners of his mouth. "Take a break, you're featherweight." She commanded loudly. Ben called out in pain. It seemed to Mal he was becoming more sensitive to any magic. When they'd passed through the barrier, he'd had a minor seizure that had only made Mal more desperate to get him back.

Mal lifted him up. Black blood dripped from underneath his armor and onto the ground, forming smooth, black stones similar to when Helena had cried onto the sand. "Out of my way!" She snapped at everyone gathered outside. "Belle, Adam, call the Fairy Godmother and summon a doctor. Sophia, help me get him up to our room!" The crowd parted as Mal walked through them. She paused only to roll her eyes at Stewart. "I thought Auradon didn't do executions." She commented before she continued onwards, referring to how every guard was holding a gun at
ready. Sophia opened the door for her, and the royal party hurried upstairs with an entourage of every available guard in the castle.

Black blood dripped on the floor all the way up the stairs.
Within ten minutes, the master bedroom had been transformed. EMT's arrived on scene and rushed to the master bedroom, escorted all the way by guards. They brought with them an arsenal of IV's, heart monitors, and a sterile tray with a variety of scissors, bandages, needles and different types of creams and disinfectants.

The sheets had been stripped off the bed and the pillows covered with plastic. They'd laid Ben out in the center of the bed and gone straight to work removing the bloodied armor and dirtied clothes from his body. The first thing the doctor did upon arriving was immediately begin treating Ben's pain, which would have set Mal's nerves at ease if she hadn't literally been awake for over thirty-six hours and if she hadn't flown well over five thousand miles across two continents and battled a sand demon and… yeah, it had been a long, long two days.

The Fairy Godmother waved her wand over Ben carefully. Mal sat on the pillow beside his head and carefully washed anything black and sandy off of him as best she could with a warm towel. Around nine, he began to run a high fever, and the magic that existed in the ancient Beast's castle began to react with him in the form of small spasms and his fading in and out of consciousness. The Fairy Godmother's face was grim. Belle and Adam sat on a couch that had been dragged into the room, and a normal medical doctor in white drew blood and ran tests on him. She, too, looked ominous.

"Blood poisoning," Doctor Scott announced with a sigh. "Seizure damage, pleural effusion, brain damage, and that's just the basis of it." She tried to pick off a bit of the sandy scab covering his chin and Ben winced. "I have no idea where the sand is materializing from," She admitted. "I might be able to treat the blood poisoning, but we need the find out what was on her nails that caused so much damage."

Mal looked at the Fairy Godmother. "What do you say?" She asked.

Fairy Godmother set her wand down with a sigh. For a second, she wouldn't meet Mal's eyes. Then, she quietly whispered: "Magical Poisoning. The sand is somehow coming straight from his heart. I can't stop it."

The words: 'Magical Poisoning' reverberated in Mal's skull. A grey cloud settled over the room as
Belle bowed her head and all color drained from Adam's cheeks.

Ben tried to lift his hand to take Mal's, but she moved her fingers out of his grasp. "No," She barked as she shook her head and stared at him accusingly. Tears were quickly gathering in her eyes. "No," She repeated, even firmer. "No, that's not fair!" She choked back a broken-hearted sob. "You never did anything to deserve this - all you ever did was do your best! I flew all the way to the Overland to save you and... you're just going to die?"

She adjusted the collar on her jacket and twisted her hands. "Don't you say your goodbyes yet," She commanded. Ben watched as she bit her lip stubbornly and tried to keep a firm composure. He lifted an arm and brushed her knee awkwardly with her wrist.

"Mal, we both know I don't have a lot of time," Ben mumbled as he struggled to move his lips. His face was swelling up and his lips were going blue.

Mal reached down and clenched the waxy plastic sheets. Her hands were shaking. She sniffled and slumped forward. "Please, don't say that," She begged as she scrubbed away at her eyes and let her fingers glide to his face. She kissed his forehead as he closed his eyes. "You can't leave me alone." She whispered

"Alone?" Ben laughed through a cough. "Yes, alone with Mom, and Dad, and Madison?" He tried to pat her hand. "You'll be okay."

"Ben," Mal whined. "I need you."

Ben did his very best to put his hands on top of hers. They were cold, waxy, and without feeling. Ben stared at them, and then looked back up at her. "I wasn't a king until you showed me what it meant to be one. And this last year and a half has been the best of my entire life. I didn't think I'd be able to correct things my parents had done. I didn't think I'd have anything important to say. I didn't think that true love would exist for someone like me." Tears fell from Mal's eyes. Ben tried to move his arms, but they had frozen in place on top of the white plastic sheets. Mal wiped her own tears off of her cheeks as her bottom lip quivered. She leaned down and pressed her forehead to his as he finished his speech: "You don't need me to be amazing."

Mal fell silent for several seconds and then sat back up, looking thoughtful. She straightened up. "You've got another natural few hours at best and mark my words, you royal pain-in-my-butt," Mal started with a deep breath. "I'm not going to watch you die." Her lips curled into a snarl as she glared at him. She snapped her fingers at Doctor Scott as she got to her feet. "Summon whatever doctors you can, treat any symptoms you're able to, and do whatever you deem necessary. I need at least an hour and a half."

"There's nothing we can do, Mal," The Fairy Godmother protested with tears in her eyes. "It'll be a miracle if he makes it to midnight. You'll just have to finish this war without him."

"There's always something we can do," Mal snapped. "Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean I can't do it. Now, what can you do for him while I work?"

Fairy Godmother stared at her in surprise. She looked around Mal to Ben, whose smile had faded somewhat. He had already resigned himself, but he believed in Mal enough to trust her judgment. He nodded to the Fairy Godmother. She exhaled softly. "I can put him to sleep," She offered. "It will slow his heart rate enough to buy Doctor Scott more time."

"I can as well," Doctor Scott added. She nudged a doctor's bag on the floor beside the bed.
"Do both," Mal advised. She dropped to her knees on the side of the bed and looked at Ben. "I love you," She told him.

"Mal," Ben whispered. He tried to reach for her, but his partial paralysis had quickly spread to his shoulders. Mal took his hands and squeezed them, even though she knew he had no feeling in them. "I love you. More than you can imagine. You're a fantastic queen. I knew you'd be amazing. Thank you for bringing me back."

Mal wiped tears off of her cheeks and kissed his forehead. "Don't think you're not going to see me again," She warned. "I'm going to be the death of you; not this Helena girl."

Ben coughed his laughter out. He looked at his parents. "Mom, dad," He called for them.

Mal immediately jumped back from his bedside as the aged queen and king got to their feet. "I'll be back," She warned. "Get him under as soon as possible." Ben looked at her forlornly, but he understood she needed to start as soon as possible. He thought this was the last time he'd see her, but she was determined to prove he was dead wrong.

Doctor Scott and the Fairy Godmother nodded. Doctor Scott opened her doctor's bag and began pulling out portable medical equipment. The first thing she began to do was put together an oxygen regulator. Mal slipped out of the room and hurried to her office in the other side of the building.

Sophia and Stewart were sitting quietly in the living room, talking softly. They stopped their conversation as Mal hurried through the room, but no one said anything.

Mal's office was a mess of papers and dusty files and things she hadn't been able to work on in two months. She turned on her computer, punched in her passcode, and then paged the Isle of the Lost.

The pulsing icon throbbed on the screen as Mal picked someone, anyone to pick it up. After about a minute, there was a click. "Eliza Deavor, Isle of the Lost," Eliza greeted her. "To whom do I speak with?"

"This is Mal," Mal assured her. "I haven't left for the Moors yet. Eliza, I need you to fetch Hades for me."

"Hades?" Eliza asked, confused. "Just to clarify; the God of Death?"

"Yes," Mal affirmed. "As quickly as you can, please. It's an emergency."

Eliza hesitated. Mal imagined her youthful protégé shuffling through papers with a confused expression. Then: "Please hold," and she heard Eliza dashing off on the other side.

Her father, the God of Death. There was no way Ben could die such a horrible death when the God of Death was literally his father-in-law. Hades wouldn't let him die.

It felt like years later when the phone was picked back up and she heard Hades ask: "Mallie?"

"Dad," The word felt dry in her throat. She tried to swallow. "I… really need your help. The King… Ben is dying. Please, can you save him?"

There was a long, slow exhale from the other side. "Sweetheart, I… don't really make exceptions to death. If it's his time, then… he's got to go, honey."

Tears filled her eyes. "It's not his time. Please, dad. There's… there's still a prophecy in motion. I know he has more time. Please, Daddy."
"Well… if there's a prophecy, then he should be able to pull through on his own, right?" Hades asked. "Give it a little faith, baby."

"I can't," Mal shook her head. "It's… Magical Poisoning. The same stuff that took mom. He's got sand… it's coming from his heart and Fairy Godmother can't stop it."

Hades fell absolutely silent. Mal pushed her fingers into her hair and pressed them against her skull. 'Please,' she silently begged.

"Baby I can't fix that even if I tried," Hades whispered. It was so soft Mal wondered if she'd hallucinated it for a moment, and then stared at the computer in shock.

"But… you're the God of Death," she whispered.

"This isn't a matter of death. If there's not a body for him to go back to, I can't send him back," Hades explained. "That stuff… destroys from the inside out. Even if I tied his soul to his body, it'd keep going until he was a pile of dust. I can't stop the poisoning."

Mal stared at the screen and then laid her head down on her desk. God, she wanted to die. Die to just get away from this mess and this abominable future. "We received a prophecy – a warning. Ben's family enchantress at Mom's funeral said that in eight weeks, so last month, I would do anything to get away. And in eleven weeks, this week, I would do anything to keep Ben alive. And in twelve weeks, next week, he would do anything to die."

"That's not exactly a happy promise," Hades said in a hushed tone. " Believe me, sweetheart, if I tie him to his body, he'll be begging for death a lot sooner than that as his body literally falls apart around him. It's a good thing that people usually die early on into that stuff."

"But it's something," Mal sniffled. "She said… she said that… I would reach the end of my magic and I would know when I had nothing left. So… there's got to be something still that I can do."

A long, slow exhale echoed through the phone. Mal knew why – she'd effectively told her father that she'd received a prophecy of her own death. When he spoke again, his voice was quivering. "Mal, what are your moorland blessings?"

Oh.

Oh.

She lifted her head up off the desk and focused on a drawing she'd made of the moorlands on the far side of the wall. The spirit of the moors wasn't pictured – Mal didn't want people in Auradon seeking her out – but Mal remembered clearly the woman's hands on her head. 'Renew' had been one of the blessings. She looked down at her own hands – bruised and with chipped nails and tiny cuts. "Dad," She whispered, still staring at her hands. "I think I have an idea."

"Yeah?" Hades asked softly, clearly not wanting to ask about it.

"Yeah," Mal affirmed. "I – I love you. You know that, right? And, uh, thank you for always trying to be there, this last month. I swear I'll find a way for you and everyone to visit Auradon once this is over. It's time for forgiveness. It's time for new beginnings."

Hades said nothing, and it took several seconds for Mal to realize he was sniffling on the other end of the phone.

"I have to make one more phone call," Mal said slowly. "I'll let you know how this all turns out."
She pictured her dad nodding on the other side before the phone line clicked and went dead. Mal wasted no time in pulling up the list of conference attendees who had filled the palace not two months ago. From Corona, Rapunzel's contact was attached. Mal found the contact, pulled out her phone, and slowly punched in the number before hitting call. It rang, and rang, and then went dead. Mal called again.

No answer.

Again, she dialed.

Nothing.

Mal growled. "Pick up!" She screamed at her phone as she began to punch in the number for the third time. Before she could hit call, a strange number appeared on her phone. Without hesitation, Mal picked up.

"Hello?" A very pretty, feminine voice asked.

"Yes, who is this?" Mal asked.

"This is Rapunzel of Corona. I saw you were trying to call me, but my phone is damaged. This is my daughter's phone. Who is this?"

"This is Queen Mal." Mal sighed in relief. "Thank god you picked up."

"Oh." Rapunzel sounded immediately uncomfortable. "Why are you calling me?"

"Ben is dying." Mal choked out. "And I know you have healing powers. Please, I need you to come to the palace and help the Fairy Godmother and I heal him."

The other end of the line was silent. After several seconds, Mal was sure Rapunzel had hung up and now Ben was doomed. Just as she was about to end the call and dissolve into tears, she heard the jangle of keys on the other end.

"Bye honey." She heard Rapunzel say in the distance before her voice returned to the call. "I'll be there in forty-five minutes, maybe thirty-five if I don't get pulled over," Rapunzel reported.

Mal almost began to cry. "I swear on my mother's magic, I will find a way to pay you back for this."

A car started up on the other end of the connection. There was a ding and a whir as Rapunzel connected her phone to the car. Suddenly her voice was much sharper and clearer. "Well, not to set standards high or anything," Rapunzel started casually, "But it'd be great if I could heal in public again without having to swear everyone I help to secrecy first."

Mal laughed. "I knew there was a reason I liked you," She told Rapunzel. "You're a little rebel."

"Did you really expect us all to stop?" Rapunzel asked.

"Never." Mal shook her head. "I'll meet you when you get here."

"I'm on my way," Rapunzel confirmed.

Mal nodded and hung up. The phone clicked dead. Someone knocked on the door. It was Lumiere, who was looking older than ever. "Did I hear right?" He asked. "Ben is dying?"
"We don't have much time." Mal shook her head. "Lumiere, have you delivered my message to the Moors yet?"

Lumiere hesitated, then shook his head. "No," He replied. "It was late last night when you left. I was gone."

"That's fine." Mal waved him off. "But I need you to take a different message to them, now if you can?"

Lumiere straightened up. "I am old, but not dead yet," He confirmed. "State your need, and I will do my best."

"I have made the decision to pull the moors into the war," Mal informed him. "Eris, Pitch Black, Helena Apate Troy and any of their consorts are now fatal enemies, and I intend to see their defeat. Please inform them that I will be heading into battle, and if they will go with me, I will raise new lands unto the moors and make cause that the moors will gain riches like nothing ever planned before."

A wicked grin spread across Lumiere's face. "You intend to bring ruin upon the Overland Villains?" He asked.

Mal sneered with a smile. "They bring it upon themselves." She picked her phone up off the desk and shut the computer down. "If you like, wait until Rapunzel arrives. Then you can leave with the knowledge that I have cured magical poisoning if my statements don't already raise enough power."

Lumiere was mystified. "Cure magical poisoning?" He asked.

"Yes," Mal agreed. "I'll not lose my husband like I did my mother." She flicked off the light and the two exited the office.

"If I may, your highness," Lumiere began. "Several hours-worth of footage of you flying over Auradon was captured and released, and one of the guards captured your arrival at the palace. The citizens are panicking."

"Later." Mal waved a hand. "First, I've got to make sure the king lives. Then I'll deal with their temper tantrums. I've got this." Mal nodded. Lumiere clapped her on the shoulder.

"Yes, you do." He nodded. Before Lumiere disappeared again, Mal took him by the shoulders and kissed both his cheeks in typical French fashion.

"Thanks for everything" She whispered.

Lumiere laughed. "You've come a long way," He told her. She nodded without comment and then hurried down to the front circle.

Mal stayed on the front steps as the Doctor and Fairy Godmother put magic and medics together openly for the first time in twenty years in a desperate battle to save the king. She hadn't been outside for long when the front doors opened, and Belle walked out. She pulled the door shut behind her and stayed a few feet behind Mal for several seconds before she asked: "You're outside. Am I allowed to talk to you, or are you taking time away from the palace?"

Mal snorted. "I'd forgotten that rule. Yeah, you can sit down." She patted the step next to her. Belle sat down and straightened her dress out as Mal played with the material on her pants. "Did the Fairy Godmother kick you out?" Mal asked.
Belle shook her head. "I couldn't watch anymore. Doctor Scott was removing the dead skin off him when Adam and I took ill. He's still upstairs, but I needed some fresh air." She folded her hands in her lap. "I thought you were working?" She asked.

"I called Rapunzel. She's on her way," Mal answered.

"Rapunzel?" Belle raised an eyebrow. "Why would you call her?"

"Desperation." Mal rolled her eyes and put her head down. "I've been up too long," She moaned.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" Belle asked.

"No." Mal shook her head. "I was a mite bit high on adrenaline."

Belle leaned over and began to trace designs on Mal's back. "That's not good for you," She cautioned. "Or for the baby. You ought to go up now to sleep."

Mal squeezed her eyes shut at the mention of her condition. "No." She disagreed. "I have to wait for Rapunzel, and then I have to go save my husband. And the baby is only a month into its existence, it probably can't tell the difference on anything." She squeezed her arms tightly around her midsection. "And I'm pretty sure both Ben and I will sleep for days after this mess anyway."

"Be that as it may, you need to take care of yourself. It's a lot harder to keep your head when you're pregnant," Belle murmured. "That's probably why you almost broke down upstairs." She let her hand drop to the pavement.

"I beg to differ." Mal snorted. "Any woman – anyone in Auradon – if they stayed up a night after learning their husband had been captured and then flew to a new continent after learning to shapeshift and then saved their husband by taking on a minor villainess head-to-head and then carrying him back only to learn he was about to die would definitely have shed a tear."

"You're not an Auradon woman, Mal," Belle replied.

Mal shook her head. "I don't think I really belong anywhere. I have three homes in the Moors, the Isle, and Auradon. I'm sort of a… conglomeration."

Belle bit her cheek and twiddled her thumbs. "Have we done good with you, Mal?" She asked.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. "I mean, I'm not dead and you guys let me become a ruler. You've overall been really fair."

"You're more powerful than us," Belle said.

"The people support you more," Mal replied.

"That's not true," Belle answered. "Even though your dragon show put them off a little bit, the kingdom is entirely entranced by you. Ben's recognized it too. Your stunts on the Isle, with the moors… I think you hold more favor than you realize." Belle took Mal's hands and exhaled. "I suppose I did expect it back when you received your blessing, but it's clear to me now that you're already a very powerful Queen. It has nothing to do with Ben. You were always a queen, we just gave you a crown. Now, you've captured the attention of Auradon, and it's up to you now what you will do with it."

"Nothing." Mal insisted. "Auradon is Ben's kingdom. I don't want to be a ruler to them."
Belle gave her an odd look. "You realize that you are pregnant with the future heir to all three countries, yes? That makes you, arguably, the most important person in the country right now."

"One of the countries." Mal put a hand to her stomach with a grimace. "Ben and I agreed they should stay separate."

"Ben still might die, Mal," Belle cautioned.

"No," Mal insisted. "I refuse to believe that."

A car pulled in at the end of the drive. Mal stood up and swayed on her feet. Belle frowned, but slowly stood as a white car pulled into the drive and a lady with a purple dress and long, golden, braided hair jumped out.

"You're here!" Mal sighed in relief. "He's upstairs, let's hurry!"

Rapunzel tossed her keys into the car and hurried to the porch. Meanwhile, Mal helped Belle inside and held the door open as Rapunzel dashed in, barefoot.

"What is it?" Rapunzel huffed as they hurried up the stairs.

"Magical poisoning," Mal explained tersely. Rapunzel bit her lip. "I can't cure that." She said.

"I'm going to try to," Mal informed her. "I just need you and the Fairy Godmother to assist me."

They dashed into the master suite and Mal opened the doors to the bedroom. Inside, Fairy Godmother and Doctor Scott worked elbow-to-elbow over Ben, whose eyes were closed like he was dreaming peacefully. Adam and Belle followed them in but averted their eyes from Ben's ruined chest. Rapunzel glanced over in horror as the smell of hot sand and medicine hit her. Large, blood-filled blisters had formed on what was left of Ben's skin since Mal had last seen him.

Fairy Godmother stepped away from Ben and together she, Mal, Rapunzel, Adam, and Belle gathered in a small circle five feet from where Ben lay.

"What do you have planned, child?" Fairy Godmother asked. Sweat coated her brow and the gloves on her hands were covered with black sand. "It keeps coming, and there is no stopping it."

"Ben's body is familiar to magic. He isn't a stranger to it. His body has the capability to accept magic instead of fight it." Mal huffed, quickly sorting her thoughts.

"This is true," Adam grumbled. "Otherwise, he could not be coronated under the magic of the wand." Fairy Godmother and Rapunzel nodded in agreement.

"The problem here is Helena's magic." Mal took a deep breath. "If I had been there when she first scratched him, I could have contained it, but her curse has spread to his entire body now. It's attacking him, but like all magic, it will change its structure if another opposing force is added. Similar to how I was able to absorb the Fairy Godmother's magic in the barrier, and it changed the structure of my magic vaguely."

"Or when Queen Narissa's and Maleficent's feet were replaced with each other. It changed their magic." Rapunzel agreed.

Mal exchanged a look with the Fairy Godmother. "Correct," Mal said. "Ben has the ability to absorb the magic he's familiar with and dispel it, but we have to, in a sense, water it down with something he's more familiar to." Mal took a deep breath. "That would be me," She said. "Ben's
experienced all three of our magical brands." She gestured to Rapunzel. "Your healing power was a gift from the sun. Nature-based. We experienced the exact same thing together in the moors, just last year." She gestured to the Fairy Godmother. "And you both blessed him as a child and coronated him as an adult. Both spells stuck, so your magic is also something not new to his system."

Mal bit her lip and then gestured to herself. "But Ben is the most familiar with my magic. I've done some pretty extreme things, and he's definitely picked up on the residue of my spellcasting. Renewing the Moors, the Isle, that sort of thing. On top of that, I'm a descendant of my mother, from after her magic was changed. That means that the same types of magic I possess…" Mal swallowed. "Is the same type of magic our blood anchor was built off of."

Belle and Adam glanced sharply at Mal as Rapunzel's face crumbled into confusion. "Blood anchor?" She asked.

Mal squeezed her eyes shut and hid her face in her hands as she slowly admitted the truth: "The reason I was brought here is that my mother cursed the firstborn of the crown to me. My mother… sold me to the crown. Ben and I have been connected our whole lives. We just didn't know it till a little over a year ago."

Rapunzel looked shocked, but she wasn't a princess to panic. "Oh," She said softly. She looked over at the bed. "But… if you have a blood anchor—"

"I can force my magic through it directly to him, and Helena's won't know to reject it until it's already in his system," Mal wiped her tears away. "It'll be just as if the anchor that has been sitting on him all his life suddenly decided to act up. It's an abstract concept, but in short, I'm planning to share as much of my magic with him through that stupid anchor while the Fairy Godmother helps me keep it open and Rapunzel tries her best to keep his body from giving up and collapsing during that. That might be enough to mutate the attacker's magic so it will quit attacking Ben."

"Giving up?" Belle exclaimed.

"This is extreme magic." The Fairy Godmother murmured, staring at her wand with something like anticipation in her eyes. "We could shatter that bond you share, we could burn out Ben's body, we might accidentally drain Mal if she doesn't know how to stop, there is an endless list of dangers."

"Couldn't you draw the magic out of him instead?" Belle blurted out.

"He's already mutated his blood and with the little magic in his system while trying to get rid of it. That's why the sand keeps coming out of his heart." Mal shook her head. The Fairy Godmother nodded in agreement. "I'd have to destroy his blood, heart, central nervous system, everywhere the sand has touched in the process."

"Which is all of him at this point," The Fairy Godmother said grimly.

"This room might not be livable anymore if we fail." Rapunzel bit her cheek as she looked around. "We might become murderers trying to save his life."

"Are you saying you might… implode my son!" Adam bellowed. His face was turning a nasty shade of puce.

"We might, or we might save him." Mal laid a hand on his arm.

"What if you drain Mal?" Belle asked, remembering what the Fairy Godmother had just rehearsed to them.
"I die," Mal responded simply. A cold weight set on her shoulders. She'd die, and that would be it.

"Die? What if you do succeed?" Belle asked, growing more and more worried.

Mal exchanged a look with Rapunzel and the Fairy Godmother. "We... don't know," She admitted.

"There will be a great deal of magic left over." The Fairy Godmother said thoughtfully. "He won't be able to control it, but-"

"It should just dissolve out of his system and fade back into the cosmos," Mal shrugged. "The room will be forever tainted, but we'll still be able to live here. The castle might just reabsorb it. Rapunzel and the Fairy Godmother are completely safe, by the way."

"And you?" Adam growled.

"I already told you." Mal straightened up. "I might die."

Belle shook her head. "What are the chances this works?" She asked.

"Slim." Rapunzel sighed. "There's a reason no one has cured magical poisoning, and Ben is literally on the cusp of death." She hesitated. "But... it's never been tried by harnessing a connection like this. Mal's right. If Ben's body has known the traces of Maleficent's magic since he was a child... there's a small chance this might work."

"That small chance is staring into the deaths of thousands of other people who passed because of poisoning," Belle protested. "If I'm to lose my son, I'll not lose my daughter-in-law and grandchild to it as well. There's too much risk. Mal, see reason. The chances this works-"

"Are enough," Mal stopped her, folding her arms.

"I'm in," Rapunzel said quickly.

"Me as well." Fairy Godmother took up her wand and rolled up her sleeves.

"No," Adam rejected. "I forbid it, Mal."

Mal's eyes hardened. "You don't control me, Adam," She warned him.

"There are laws against magic and we have broken enough today," Adam growled. "You with your shapeshifting and now this? I won't have it anymore."

"I'm not an official citizen of Auradon," Mal said softly. "When you first brought me over, I never conferred. I'm still recognized as an Isle citizen, and magic is perfectly legal over there."

"Fairy Godmother and Rapunzel are." Adam hissed. "And you are on Auradonian land."

Rapunzel stepped up. "Mal is queen." She said. "And I will break the old laws to follow a new light."

"Aye." Fairy Godmother nodded. "I supported that law in theory, but when my Jane began to fall apart, I realized just how dangerous this whole thing is." She shook her head. "We were fools to think we could blockade magic."

Belle and Adam exchanged panicked looks. They were beginning to understand more and more that they were on the losing side, and they were quickly running out of cards to play. Belle put her hand on Mal's shoulder. "He's our son Mal, and as he's unconscious, I think it's best we make the
decision to withhold this treatment in consideration of the parties. The law states that if he's unable
to make decisions, we may step in as his parents."

Mal took Belle's hand and gave it a squeeze. "You two know I respect you above all others." She
said. "And I value your advice on everything." Adam and Belle both tensed, sensing a 'but'. Mal
straightened her shoulders and delivered the blow. "But I am his wife. You allowed me to marry
him as his wife, not by any other title. You understood the risks and consequences, yet still allowed
me that legal claim over him. And now I, as his wife, insist that he undergo this treatment."

There were a few beats of silence. Belle looked horrified, but Adam simply stared at her. "Please,
Mal!" Belle started to beg, but Rapunzel cut her off.

"She's right." Rapunzel sighed. "Spousal wishes override Parental after someone chooses to be
wed. By marrying her, Ben chose to let Mal make decisions like these, should the circumstance
arise."

"Ben trusted her anyway," Fairy Godmother added as she moved to the bed. Doctor Scott moved
aside to make room for the Fairy Godmother. "He nodded his consent to her plan."

"He wouldn't have if he'd known it might involve her dying!" Belle protested.

"Be that as it may, Mal has a greater claim," Rapunzel said as she reached for the end of her braid
and began to untie her now-eighty feet of golden hair. "It'll probably be safer for all non-magic
people to be absent from the room." She announced. "Please remove yourselves from the area."

Mal locked eyes with Belle and Adam. Belle was shaking her head and Adam… Adam was staring
at her, completely emotionless. He swallowed and put his hands into his pockets. "Well," he
sighed, "You… you are the queen, so…"

"Adam, no!" Belle whirled around. "No, no, no, no!" She grabbed at the ends of her hair and
pulled. "This is my son!" She yelled. "My son and my daughter and my grandchild! I raised him –
he's mine!"

Mal stared at Adam. "You'll… stand behind me?" She asked.

Adam looked away as tears filled his eyes. "Well, I've messed you up enough already," he
declared. "I have… dealt with you horribly and even worse with Ben. He wouldn't be the way he is
if not for Belle. I think… you ought to know what is best for him."

"She is seventeen!" Belle protested. "Seventeen and she hasn't slept and she's overemotional! She's
not thinking clearly and you're stepping down to prove what? Don't you want her alive? Or is the
kingdom still all you care about?"

"I can't rule Auradon," Adam admitted through gritted teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. "That much
has been made clear. I can't protect Ben either anymore. He's… he's not a boy anymore."

Something clicked in Mal's head. Adam, the man who had suffered what he'd thought was an
eternal punishment for failing to help someone. The man who'd had an entire brand-new country
placed on his shoulders with everyone looking to him to fix everything. The man who couldn't turn
them away or let them down. "You're still reliving your mistake, aren't you?" She whispered.

"I shouldn't have yelled at you in Ben's office," Adam confessed. "You are powerful. And you
work hard and throwing Ben in your face was horrible. So, if I never see you again, know I am
sorry."
"I meant forty years ago," Mal corrected him. "The Beast… the first time. You've… spent all these years trying not to be that person and I threw that all back in your face. I-I'm sorry." And this time, from the bottom of her heart, she meant it.

Adam opened his eyes and blinked at her. "It is… difficult," He admitted. "I got used to being needed. The Beast… he wasn't needed. Wasn't wanted. But King Adam had a wife. He had a kingdom. He had a son. All these people looked up to him."

"And then those things moved on," Mal finished in a hushed tone. Belle was jumping straight into retirement and being a grandmother, raising a new baby that she didn't have to balance with work. Auradon now looked to Ben. And Ben had been more ready than Adam had expected. He'd never once needed to go back to his dad for advice, finding solace in Mal instead.

Adam nodded, not finding anymore words, and Fairy Godmother put a hand on Mal's shoulder. "I know you have goodbyes," she whispered, "But we have to move fast. The closer he goes to death, the harder it will be to bring him back."

"Yes," Mal agreed, running her hands through her hair. "Yes." She took a deep breath and tried to focus on Bella and Adam. She tried to search for something – anything – to say and found herself coming up blank. Holy crap, she was so tired. "I – I'll probably be just like you. When I have to let the Moorlands and the Isle go. I mean, if I live through this." She laughed and looked over her shoulder at Ben before exhaling. "If I don't… take care of things for me, please? Ben's laws are in my office on the Isle. Try and get them put in. His vision is more than any of us even have room in our minds for." She laughed, shaking her head, and then held out a hand for Adam to shake.

Adam stared at her extended hand and then pulled her into a hug instead. Mal felt herself go rigid before he set her back on her feet. Belle suddenly became weak in the knees and collapsed to the floor. "No!" She gasped, shaking her head so fast that her tears were flung off at Mal's feet. She squeezed Mal's hands until her fists turned white. "Please," She begged as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Please. I can't lose two children."

Mal hugged her Mother-in-law and kissed her cheek. She took a whiff of Belle's rose perfume and sniffled. "Thanks for everything, Belle. You've been a wonderful second mom to me."

"Come on, Belle," Adam whispered. He swept her up into her arms as Belle began to yell in protest. Mal followed them to the door. Doctor Scott, too, vacated the premises. The moment they stepped out, Mal shut the doors behind them and locked them, using a little magic to ensure they wouldn't be opened until all was said and done. She could hear Belle sobbing and screaming on the other side.

Mal turned to Ben with tears falling from her eyes and went to kiss his brow, right in between his eyes. "It's going to be okay." She whispered. She ran her hand over the oxygen mask on his face and briefly examined the heart monitor, the IV, and the oxygen tank before unhooking them all and putting them aside. Then all three women rolled up their sleeves and went to work.

"Help me with my hair," Rapunzel commanded as she attempted to shake her golden locks out of an elaborate five-strand braid. Fairy Godmother and Mal immediately jumped to her aid. The moment Mal touched Rapunzel's hair, she could feel the magic pulsing through the locks. Rapunzel hadn't used her gift for a long time, and the magic was aching to be used.

Between Rapunzel, Fairy Godmother, and Mal, Rapunzel's hair was untangled within five minutes. She, the Fairy Godmother, and Mal immediately began to pick the piles of golden locks up to drag them to the bed.
"Is it better to try the larger lacerations or the small cuts?" Rapunzel wondered aloud.

"Well, we're hoping the sand will withdraw, yeah?" Mal reasoned. "So… what are the chances he starts bleeding once the sand starts to leave his system?"

"High." The Fairy Godmother winced. "Probably best to try the largest cuts."

"And cover his heart," Mal added. "I'm still not entirely sure we won't stop his heart beating. Hopefully, Rapunzel's healing magic will be enough to stop him from dying."

"I healed Flynn with a single tear." Rapunzel reminded them. I think I can do this."

"Yeah, it's just keeping the King of all Auradon alive for the next, what, a half-hour?" Mal said sarcastically.

"Probably closer to a couple hours." The Fairy Godmother advised.

"No pressure," Rapunzel commented drolly as she picked up the end of a large lock of hair and began wrapping it up the length of Ben's arm. She left spaces in between each wrap so that Mal could see the black streaks running up his arms through his arteries and veins. Mal helped gently lift Ben up as Rapunzel spread the strands of her hair around the wounds on his chest. They had to be careful of the oxygen machine and the various IV's as they worked, but soon Rapunzel was wrapping her hair in the opposite direction up his second arm, leaving no tangles or knots in any of her locks.

The Fairy Godmother sat Mal down on a corner of the bed. "Sit there and breathe a bit." She commanded. "You're about to expel a lot of magic." She took Mal's place helping Rapunzel wrap another strand of hair loosely around Ben's neck and down around his armpits and shoulders. He looked like he was being harnessed into some sort of protective gear. Mal twisted her hands and tried to control her heart rate as she fidgeted. Rapunzel and the Fairy Godmother wrapped a long lock of hair around Ben's forehead, and then both looked at Mal. She stood back up.

"Rapunzel, you'd best stay here, beside the bed." The Fairy Godmother guided the young woman to the side of the bed. "And Mal, you'd best try your best to be as close to the original wounds as possible."

Mal nodded and squeezed Ben's grey, lifeless hand as she walked to her post. "The drugs and spells might not be enough to keep him under." She warned the two women. "We won't be able to stop the spell if he wakes up."

"He won't be able to move until everything is done." Fairy Godmother sighed. "Already, the grey has spread to his legs."

Mal nodded. "Well, I guess I might hear him curse my name yet." She chuckled.

Neither Fairy Godmother nor Rapunzel laughed with her. Rapunzel gave the teenager a hug. "Everything will be fine." She told her.

Mal cracked her knuckles. "If the spell starts to fail, and I start to die, I want you to leave the room, please." She told everyone in the room. "If Ben and I do die, let it be known that my sister, Madison, will inherit all three of the kingdoms. Until she comes of age, Audrey, daughter of Aurora, will have supreme command over the Isle, Former King Adam and Queen Belle will regain control of the Kingdom of Auradon, and the control of the moors will return to the Spirit therein, while all statements currently enforced will be continued." Mal exhaled. "As I have spoken, let it so be." She rehearsed solemnly.
Rapunzel and the Fairy Godmother both nodded and whispered: "Amen," under their breaths. They looked once more at Ben.

"I will search for the anchor first." Fairy Godmother declared. "And I will strengthen it as much as I can. Rapunzel, as soon as it becomes visible, it is your job to start your enchantments. Mal, the moment the magic from Rapunzel's hair touches him, he will be in pain. You need to move as quickly as possible and begin your casting as soon as we're sure Rapunzel's magic is supporting him."

"Alright," Rapunzel agreed. "Definitely did not think I would end up doing this when I got up this morning." She added under her breath. Mal only nodded silently.

Fairy Godmother picked up her wand and waved it. "Bibbity, bobbity, boo!" She whispered. The tip of the wand lit with blue flames, and the room disappeared around them. Everything was black except for the bed upon which Ben laid and the three teammates who were working to save his life.

Mal became intensely aware of all of the magic in the room. She could feel the great power that resided in Fairy Godmother's wand, and she could feel the coursing power in every strand of Rapunzel's hair. It was as if she had second vision when she looked at Ben. She could see him, pale, sweaty, dying on the makeshift medical bed, but she could also see the sandy black Overland magic that was creeping through every vein, every nerve in Ben's body. She could see it slowly killing him.

Mal looked down at her hands and saw, to her great astonishment, that her body had disappeared. In its place, she saw a humanoid figure made of what appeared to be glowing, green fire, with streaks of gold and blue running through her.

Magic.

She wondered at the sight of it as she took in her glowing fingers and saw in amazement how it pooled and flowed from one area of her body to another. This was what it meant to be magical; to have another layer of yourself that lay in-between dimensions and fueled everything she did. It coursed through her, ran underneath her skin, and made her magical.

Mal had had no idea just how powerful she was.

Singing reached her ears. She looked back to the scene in front of her and was once again amazed. White threads had appeared on top of Ben's heart, forming a string that connected his heart to hers, Mal coiled her hand around it and pulled firm, and felt a tug in her chest. It was exactly as if someone had tied a physical string around her heart and left it out for her to pull at. This would be the curse that had almost destroyed Auradon.

Gold spread down Rapunzel's hair, and Mal stepped closer to Ben and readied herself.

She needed to see the magic in Ben's body, just like she was seeing it in hers. She looked down at her husband's face and tried to lower her eyes to see him in the dimension she was currently existing in. It was next to impossible.

As Rapunzel's magic reached Ben, his body gave a lurch and Mal withheld a scream as the little magic underneath his skin began to swim in nauseating patterns. It was like watching a school of fish swimming in three million directions with trying to keep track of them all. Ben's skin flickered off and on his form. Mal grit her teeth and focused on the magical side of her husband, which was almost nonexistent. Only Helena's residual magic and Maleficent's bond was prevalent on his form.
Mal took a deep breath and used her will to impose her magic to bend to her command. Magic began to leak out of her fingers like she was a water balloon and someone had put small holes underneath her nails. Green flames trickled down Maleficent's makeshift soul bond, slowly approaching Ben.

The flames entered Ben's heart directly through the anchor, and he lurched. His eyes flew open and dry, black sand spilled out of them. He screamed, and every hair on Mal's body rose on end. The black sand immediately began to battle her flames back. Mal lurched desperately and forced the flames through her bond quicker than ever. She planted her other hand on an area of Ben's skin that wasn't covered by Rapunzel's hair and forced the flames to leak through her hand there and go directly into his skin. Now she had two fronts she was fighting.

Ben continued to scream and writhe in pain. The black sand battled fiercely, but Mal knocked it back. "This is my husband." She told it. "Not your host."

It wasn't easy, and for a long time Mal kept pouring energy into no change, but then suddenly she felt something change in their bond. She looked down. Ben's seizure-like movements were growing more and more sluggish, and his heartbeat was slowing. Mal felt something sharp yank in her chest. His heart slowed, shuddered, and stopped. Rapunzel seized Mal's shoulders and moved her aside as Mal stared in horror. The tall blonde put one hand around another and began pressing down on Ben's chest. After only a few compressions, his heart began to beat again. Mal immediately began to push the flames back through the spell and the three of them watched in amazement as both her flames and the sands seemed to abruptly lose the nerve to fight. They stilled, and mixed, resulting in the darkest indigo color she'd ever seen. Ben stopped screaming. It wasn't sandy or fiery but seemed waxier in comparison to either of the two magics. It was like… molten glass. The indigo faded, and Mal got the impression it was spreading to the rest of his body. She continued forcing magic through the bond, but it was becoming harder. She examined the magical string. What had started out only a few minutes before as a strong white lifeline was now dimming into a tattered, grey strand. Mal began to desperately force more through it.

Ben's body writhed harder, but Mal could see magic spreading to previously immovable parts of his body. His legs gained mobility, and he arched his neck backward. Just in time, too. The bond was about to break.

Back when the Fairy Godmother had tried to first break the bond, they had tried everything they knew of. They'd forced magic into it, tried to unravel it, and spent months looking for any sort of weakness. They'd finally managed to scatter it by unraveling Narissa's magic from Maleficent's, but that didn't mean it had been broken back then. Fairy Godmother had said it was likely impossible to break, but as Mal watched hinks appear in the trauncts of the spell length, she knew that wasn't right.

"The bond is about to shatter." She told the Fairy Godmother. Her voice echoed even though it had nothing to bounce off of. "Take cover."

The support she'd been getting from the Fairy Godmother abruptly vanished. Mal gasped as the line shuttered, pulled at her heart, and then broke into two. The magical fire that had been on its way to Ben's heart fell to the floor and burned through the ground. Mal gasped in pain as the remaining spell around her heart dissolved, and Maleficent's greatest spell of all was finally gone.

The sands built up and began to overtake Ben's heart again. Mal immediately leaped forward and pressed both of her bare hands to his heart and forced everything she had into him. It was noticeably easier to transfer magic directly, but her muscles began to ache and feel sore. Mal looked down at her body and watched in horror as the sea of flooding, fiery green was siphoned up
her arms and out of her body. Already, she was half-drained.

The sharp increase of fire inside of Ben did immediate wonders to him, however. More blue indigo glass appeared and melted away into his system. Ben stopped his writhing and she felt heat return to his heart, whereas it had previously been cold to the touch.

Unfortunately, Mal's body was quickly losing magic, and she couldn't remove her hands. She was firmly attached to Ben while he siphoned out everything that she had. Mal looked down at her body and watched as she grew dimmer and dimmer. She had to stop. She had to find another source, otherwise, she would die and he with her. She tried to take her hands back but they seemed to be stuck to his skin. She began to grow dizzy and more and more magic left her body. Her legs wobbled beneath her, and she swayed as her vision went black.

She felt herself falling forward, hitting Ben's forehead, and suddenly, the room vanished. Mal found herself staring at a gruesome scene. A young girl of thirteen was sitting against a grey, stone brick wall, screaming. The air quality, which made Mal cough and choke a little, screamed 'Isle'. Eight others were surrounding her, unsure of what to do. Mal felt a lot... shorter than she normally was. She looked around and recognized an area of the old Isle of the Lost. The screaming girl was Maggie, a victim of Gaston's and one of Evie's old friends. She had been dead for almost ten years. This scene, which had scarred Mal's view on the world permanently, had occurred several years ago when Mal was nine. She watched Maggie throw her head back and scream and recalled exactly what she was re-witnessing. Maggie was in childbirth at age twelve. She would not survive.

One of the unsure girls shook her head. "It's been too long," they whispered. "She's out of time."

"Wait," Another girl commanded. She was a blue-haired girl that Mal remembered as Evie at fourteen. "Give it a little longer. If the baby doesn't come, then I'll go get my mom to help her."

"She's out of time!" A third girl proclaimed. "She's been in labor for over a day and she's two months too soon. She's too small. She's going to die."

Someone held a hand aloft in the crowd as Maggie's screams echoed off the walls. Clutched in their fist was a warped, broken metal beam with a sharpened edge. "We can use this!" They declared. Mal tried to turn away, but she was immobile, stuck in her old self's body. Luckily, though, the memory fell dark. Despite the abrupt cut-off, Mal remembered exactly what had happened and what horrible ending Maggie had suffered. Neither mom nor baby had survived.

As abruptly as the first memory ended, she was thrust into a new one, where she was eleven and Maleficent was staring down at her with a sneer. "Not evil enough!" Her mother howled. "You're just like your father! Weak, inconsolable brat!" Maleficent picked up a living room lamp and flung it at the far wall. Then she stood, heaving as she caught her breath with a crazed gleam in her eyes. The green light of her magic was flickering behind her irises like a lightbulb about to die. "How can you expect to make Momma proud like that? All the plans I have for you... I'm just trying to teach you the thing that really counts... how to be me." Mal swallowed, and against her will, began to speak.

"I know that, and I'll do better,"

She started falling through space until she was thirteen and her arms were thin and her cheeks were shallow and she was starving to death. "Why am I reliving the Isle?" She demanded mentally, watching herself pull threads off of her clothes, bunch them into a ball, and put them into her mouth to suck on the dirty mess. Was this supposed to mean she'd died? Had Ben died too?

At her prompting, the scene changed. This place was bright, warm, and smelled like sweet flowers.
She was at the palace, outside and in the sunshine, and hiding underneath a bush. And that startled her because as far as she knew, she'd never once hidden under a bush in the Auradon gardens. Laid behind the roses and looked at the sky, yes. Hid in a tree and leaped down from the branches, yes, but never hidden under a bush.

The leaves rustled and Belle's face appeared, pushing the branches aside. "I found you!" She cheered, holding out her hands. Mal felt herself squeal as she dashed forward and into Belle's arms. Belle laughed, tickling Mal's sides.

"How'd you find me?" She asked in a bewildered, different voice - Ben's voice.

Belle chuckled. "Oh, Mon Cher, there is nowhere in this world you could go that I couldn't be with you." As these words left Belle's mouth, she began to fall through space again. Somehow, she realized, she was sharing memories with her husband. Her husband that was dead or dying beneath her body while she was trapped in this whirlwind. Now she was watching Ben watch his dad in a meeting. Then, she was sitting alone in her room on the Isle and listening to Maleficent cackle upstairs. With barely a pause she was sitting at a boy's desk and listening to her in-laws screaming at each other outside. "He's not just the crown prince, Adam! He's my only baby!" Belle screamed, her voice echoing as Mal began to relive a battle against the Isle Pirates. That was the last memory of them separate. The next memory was herself from Ben's perspective, staring at her as the guards pulled her out of the car on day one.

She'd wondered before what Ben's first impressions of her were, and now she had her answer. As she watched herself hold her shoulders up and back, she heard Ben's distant thoughts. "That's her? She's just a child!"

The scenes persisted, sometimes in her perspective and sometimes in his. She felt herself kissing him for the first time, but felt him being married to her. As the crown went down on his head, her image was frozen in his mind and in his thoughts. "I'm going to protect you," he promised. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you." It was an interesting thing to watch herself fall in love in fast-forward. Soon, she was watching herself come home to Ben and was watching them kiss each other and learn to work with each other. She felt Jay kissing her hard before the scene grew dark and quiet. While she wasn't immediately sure of where she was, it only took the feel of Ben's mouth on her shoulder for her to realize that this was their first night together. She felt his anxiousness and his doubts and his determination to make her happy, and closed her eyes to relish the beautiful memory. She said goodbye to her mother again and then felt Ben's perspective as he stared at the test on the bed, slowly coming to the conclusion he was going to be a dad. And truth be told, she felt guilty as they delved into memories of the last few weeks. She saw his worry for her mounting as she talked about it less and less, always deflecting his questions. He wanted it all so badly and she just... didn't.

The memories suddenly stopped and Mal was floating in a vast expanse of space. She tried to find her body but honestly had no clue where she was even supposed to start. There was nothing except empty space until a tiny light appeared in front of her, like a pinprick of white. Curious, she reached out for it, and her fingers closed around it. Immediately, she was pulled inside and found herself in Ben's old room. Another memory, she sighed, but this one was much more intense and real. She could move. It was like she was a ghost, peering in on a moment and unable to interact with it. Ben was sitting across from his parents on a chaise with a coffee table in between them. A large bottle of alcohol was open on the table, and Ben was holding a filled glass and swirling it carefully, looking like he was in physical pain. Mal's hands dropped. When had this happened?

"This is going to be so, so hard on her," Ben mumbled.
"It's not just about Mal," Adam declared. "You're giving up more than you're gaining. By all means, this is working out far more favorably for her than for you."

"I don't think so," Ben disagreed. His hands were steady on his glass despite his expression giving the impression he was being stabbed.

"What's she losing?" Adam demanded softly. "Your entire life has been turned upside down and you're losing just as much freedom as she is."

"She's lost her mom," Ben shook his head and then continued listing things - all in her defense, which made Mal smile a little as she stared at him. "She's lost that trust. She's losing everything she ever knew and has to leave her childhood behind. All her friends, all her power, her home and where she grew up, her anonymity - you know people are going to smear her for this. She has all the extra responsibilities that she was never trained for..." Ben slumped back into his chair, swirling his drink a little more as he winced. "Not to mention she's a teenaged bride to someone who's five years older than her. She's basically lost her entire life, the freedom to make her own relationships and live where she wants, everything she's ever known, and it's not even over. She's going to lose the confidence of everyone she knows. She's going to lose years of her life to helping us cover this up, lose so many of those experiences she really should be entitled to as a teen in favor of being a wife at sixteen, having the rest of her life and carrier tainted by my name, losing her v-" Ben cut off with a choke. "Chastity," He ammended, squeezing his eyes shut.

Mal frowned. This was a side of the story she had never heard. She hovered beside the couch and then took a tentative seat beside him. Ben, of course, didn't notice. Across the table, Belle ran a hand through her hair wearily. Her entire demeanor was slumped and radiated defeat. "Have you talked to Mal about it yet?" She asked as Ben downed his entire glass with his eyes squeezed shut.

"God, no," He moaned and leaned forward to refill his drink. "She's still struggling with not being on the Isle with her friends and she just barely started opening herself up to the idea of fixing the Isle. I can't... can't ask that of her."

"Have you gotten any for-sure's from the Fairy Godmother?" Adam asked.

Ben shook his head. "It's all up in the air at the moment. They're running tests of the curse. If Maleficent's spell is specific to a political union, then it won't matter if we consummate or not. But if it's a full-on magical fae-type union, then..." Ben trailed off and took a large gulp of his alcohol. Mal's face felt tingly and numb as she stared at him. This... had to have happened, probably not long after his interview. She had never known...

Belle and Adam watched their son's hands shake on his glass. Adam chewed on his lips and then said: "But a royal marriage is a magical event anyways."

"But the political side will be complete after the ceremony. The country doesn't have to know about the rest," Ben explained. "We can hold out on completing the magical side of things unless the spell says otherwise." There was a pause as Ben took another drink. "Assuming Maleficent actually did specify that the magical half of the ceremony has to be upheld, she's the worst mother on the planet for putting her sixteen-year-old girl up to assault by a guy she knew was already five when her daughter was born. That's also taking into consideration fae law forbids-" Ben scrunched up his face. "I can't remember the term," He mourned, reaching to refill his glass again.

Belle stopped him. "No more," She commanded.

"One more?" Ben pleaded.
"One more will turn into five more, but no more starts now," Belle refuted with a stern look of stone. Ben froze, taking in her statement, and then slowly set his glass down with a nod. Her mother nodded. "What are you planning on doing when you share a room with Mal? You can't spend every evening wallowing in your own self-pity."

"I won't," Ben agreed. "Just let me have this for now,"

"Distraction is one step from addiction," Adam declared.

Ben covered his face with his hands. "I can't do it," He declared. "What do I do if I have to? I can't... fight her." He broke off, trembling and shaking and looking like he was suffering through his own personal natural disaster. Mal watched in growing horror. She couldn't believe that this had happened without her ever discovering. "Listen, Mom and Dad," Ben exhaled. "If this doesn't work out how we hope it will and I end up having to... hurt Mal, can you please step in afterward? She won't want to see me, won't want me around, but I can't let her be alone after something that damaging."

"We'll take care of her," Belle assured her son as Adam nodded along.

Ben exhaled and then got up to put away his bottle of alcohol. Belle and Adam looked sickened as they watched their son try to regain his bearings. He took a deep breath. "I'll stop," He promised softly. "And I'll take care of her. As long as it lasts and for as long as she's here."

Mal reached out to see if she could touch Ben, but the vision went spiraling away, leaving her feeling shocked and conflicted. How many of those conversations had taken place? What had happened? Obviously, the Fairy Godmother had come back with good news, but...

Color filled her vision, cutting off her thoughts. She got the sudden feeling that this was the very last vision. After that, she supposed she'd discover whether or not she'd died or not. She stumbled a little as the world came into focus around her and her mouth dropped a little as she recognized the room around her. It was both everything and nothing like she'd remembered. She appeared to be in Maleficent's room on the Isle of the Lost, though much cleaner than it'd ever been before. There was sunshine outside. Actual sunshine on the Isle, though it was dim.

Maleficent's bed moved and Mal watched her mother rise up. Her head covering was off and her long, brown hair was falling off her shoulders. Sweat covered her face as she leaned down, keeping her feet planted on the floor, and lifted a bundle up into her hands. Mal choked and almost hit the ground. "Hello baby," Maleficent whispered in a tone so emotional and open that Mal immediately doubted it had come from her mom. She managed to take a few shaky steps forward. Maleficent was holding a girl even smaller than Madison but with the same bright purple hair. Herself. A tiny Mal.

Mal had been privileged to know portions of her birth story from the Evil Queen. She'd been born silent after a day's worth of labor on her mom, and a little early. Maleficent had endured all by herself with the Evil Queen stopping by with water every so often. Mal knew she'd stayed silent until they'd named her. She watched her own little eyes open and close, already vivid green, and then looked to her mom. Maleficent was tearing up and smiling proudly as she looked down on her perfect little baby girl. "Hello Baby," She whispered again. "Mommy's so happy you're here now. Do you know who I am?"

'Here it comes,' Mal thought; the I-Am-Maleficent speech. Maleficent leaned down and pressed her forehead against Mal's. "I'm your mommy, and I love you more than anything else. You're my special little fairy. Oh, you look so much like your grandma with that hair."
Mal picked at her hair, feeling tears piling in her eyes. Her grandmother. Now she knew.

"You're the most beautiful baby ever," Maleficent crowed in adoration. "You're my little princess. Just you wait until you're older. You're going to get us all off this island." Maleficent's language slipped and she began speaking in Faesh. Mal's ears rang as she listened to her mom expound, well, everything. Her mouth dropped open in shock. "You're going to be a lively, powerful, passionate woman with powers like the world has never seen. You'll lead all of this people into a new place and you'll be a queen of many lands. And even in lands where you aren't queen, your name will be revered. People in power will crumble when you look their way and your foresight will lead nations to greatness."

"Sounds like the opposite of what you're looking for," a voice from the hallway announced. It was the Evil Queen, with a little black-haired Evie trailing behind her. She approached the bed, glanced over Maleficent's shoulder, and then asked: "Have you named her yet?"

"Oh baby, what should we call you? Do you like Fier? Or maybe Lyst?" Maleficent turned her head to the side. Tiny Mal did not respond. "What about Mal? Just like your momma?"

At the name, Little Mal screwed up her face and began to cry. Maleficent chuckled and hugged the baby close to her chest. "Oh, my little Mal," She whispered, tears leaking out from underneath closed eyes as she cradled the baby. "You won't let your momma down, right? You're going to be just as strong as me. Times will get crazy, but you are going to be everything we need."

With the force of what felt like a speeding train, she was flung out of the memories and back into her body. Their room - hers and Ben's - came back around her, sturdy and real. Ben was underneath her, and rapidly regaining color. She pushed herself up with a gasp as her vision went crazy - shades of green, glints of white, and the magical vision struggling to separate from the real view of things. Fairy Godmother pulled Mal back a few steps and waved a hand in front of her face. "Are you alright?" She asked. "Can you see?"

"Vaguely," Mal whispered. Her throat was hoarse. She tried to swallow, but she was all dried up. She heard the Fairy Godmother start talking about fluids to Rapunzel, but her eyelids were beginning to grow heavy. She gasped for breath as she examined her magic. In her hands, blue indigo magic was blending with what was left of her green magic. Mal focused on a small portion of her stomach as the blue glass slipped around her arms and joined the magic inside her body, which changed color vaguely. There was no magic inside a portion of her torso. Mal wondered what that meant.

Ben was laid on the bed comfortably. Green and black magical stains in a multi-pointed star pattern covered the sheets upon their makeshift medical bed. The blue glass had begun to spread rapidly through his frame. The green fire only added to the glass as it branched out. Mal couldn't believe her eyes. It appeared that the glass was... devouring the sand. It consumed the black specks and drove what it did not dissolve out through the pores of Ben's skin. The black, sandy scabs, barely visible through Rapunzel's hair, detached from Ben's chest.

"How long will all this magic be inside of him?" Mal asked, tilting her head. "There's so... much."

"Probably a few days," Fairy Godmother assured her. "Then it will all be gone and all will be back to normal. Don't worry, child."

Fairy Godmother and Rapunzel began to rapidly untangle Rapunzel's hair from Ben's frame. Mal blinked several times. The real world was returning to her vision in bits and pieces. She could see the new skin that Rapunzel had healed on Ben's chest where taking off his armor had peeled it off, but at the same time she was watching as all of that blue-glass magic gathered together underneath
the wounds in Ben's chest and began to filter through him, just like it did in Mal's body. His heart pumped it out to his fingers and back, and Mal watched as the last of the sand disappeared into the glass or was pushed out of his body through his pores. It would probably take several hours, maybe days for it to diminish out of his bloodstream and into his surroundings, and then all would be alright. He would be okay.

Mal swayed and sat down before she reached for Ben's hand and found it warm to the touch. She squeezed, but he didn't squeeze back. Mal squinted at the new, pink skin across his chest and noticed something was amiss. She frowned as she reached out and brushed her hands down Ben's pectorals. What had started out as six long scratches on his neck, collar and chest, not counting the small one on his chin, had solidified into what looked and felt like black lizard skin.

Mal brushed her thumb over the smallest patch of black scales on his chin, not even a half-inch long, and then trailed a finger down the largest nail line over his chest. Ben shivered in his sleep at her touch. She pulled her hand back. "Sensitive," She whispered and began brushing the loose sand off of him that had been pushed up by the blue magic.

Rapunzel was hastily re-braiding her hair. "It looks like the dragon." She sighed. "The one you turn into." She didn't look nearly as exhausted as the Fairy Godmother or Mal did.

Mal blinked. Transforming into a dragon seemed like years ago, but she supposed yes, the scales on Ben's chest did look an awful lot like her dragon scales. "Incredible," She whispered.

"His parents won't like them," Fairy Godmother said as she dropped to the floor beside the bed.

"Well, it's with scales or dead," Mal said as the last few dredges or her abnormal vision returned to normal. The blue glass look underneath Ben's skin vanished from her sight, even though she knew it still remained under his skin for now. "Did the scales… come from me?"

Fairy Godmother sniffled. "I don't know." She whispered and covered her face with her hands.

Rapunzel fastened her braid and bent down to hug the older woman. "I'm so sorry." She whispered.

Fairy Godmother began to cry. Mal slid off the bed and crouched down beside them. "What happened?" She whispered. The Fairy Godmother opened her hands but did not answer. Mal looked to Rapunzel for answers.

"Her wand melted when the anchor shattered," Rapunzel whispered. "She had it completely invested in the spell. It's a good thing you warned us because she was almost burned."

Mal's mouth formed a perfect little 'o' as the Fairy Godmother's shoulders began to shake. "It was for a good cause." The older woman tried to console herself. "I'm happy it worked." She buried her face in her hands as the tears started to flow freely.

Mal put her arms around the Fairy Godmother's shoulders. "Is there any way we can get you a new wand? I could have someone forge something from the moors."

Fairy Godmother stood up with a sniffle. "Do not worry. I will be fine." She got to her feet slowly. "Without the wand, the authority of crown will need to be passed by hand. I will visit later to discuss with you and Ben." She wiped tears off her cheeks and went to the door. She pulled on the handles, but the doors were locked. Mal forced herself to her feet. The world tilted, but she strode forward.

The Fairy Godmother moved aside as Mal stumbled forward and took hold of the knob. "Make it easy, make it quick." she paused to yawn widely. "Open up without a kick." She finished. The
doors flew open and Mal sank to the floor as her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

"Mal!" Belle exclaimed from the living room.

"Mal!" Adam stood up beside the sofa. His eyes were wide as he looked at her like he'd never seen her before. Mal covered her eyes to shield from the bright lights in the living room and groaned. Small hands rushed to her shoulders. The sky outside the windows was dark, but steadily brightening. She'd now been up for forty-eight hours.

"Are you alright?" Belle asked her. The rose perfume wasn't helping Mal's return to Earth.

"Sleep," Mal mumbled as Belle and Sophia helped her up and turned her back around.

Belle gasped and left Sophia to support her as she walked to Ben. "Ben?" She whispered. She put a hand on her son's shoulder but jumped back when she was shocked.

"He's still got lots of magic on him." Mal yawned. She stepped over the portion of the carpet that had burned away to floorboard when the anchor had shattered and snapped her fingers at the bed.

"Forgive this poor abused space and clean up this entire place!" She commanded. The sand blew off and arranged itself into piles on the side of the bed. The sheets were still stained in fiery patterns of green and there was a funny ivory spot next to Ben's feet, but aside from that, everything was clean. Mal stretched her arms above her head and went to retrieve the bedspread from where it had been stashed in Ben's closet.

"What happened?" Belle exclaimed. "How did you do it?"

The Fairy Godmother took a tissue from a side table and curtseyed hastily. "I'm going to take my leave now, your highnesses." She wiped her eyes as she hurried to the door.

"I'll fill you in," Rapunzel said, taking Belle's shoulders. "We have lots to discuss. Mal, are you coming?"

Mal reappeared, hauling the bedspread out of the closet, and threw it on the bed without a word. She snapped her fingers at it with a yawn, and it straightened out. "No." She told the pair dejectedly. "I've been up for almost fifty hours. I need to sleep." She climbed onto the bed beside Ben and curled his arm around her before leaning into his shoulder. She didn't care that it wasn't exactly polite to fall asleep with a guest in the room. In her defense, it had been a very long forty-eight hours. She fell asleep within thirty seconds, snoring softly with her head resting on Ben's chest as they both rested from the experience they'd just endured.

Rapunzel and Belle shut the lights off on the couple and closed the doors. Then Belle guided Rapunzel to the couch with a 'tell me everything'. Meanwhile, Lumiere stood at attention beside the closed door with tears in his eyes. She'd done it. She'd really done it. He'd seen it with his own eyes that Ben was fine now.

He wiped his eyes and left without a word or a glance back. Mal had pulled more than enough of her weight, and it was now time to do his portion to set the ball rolling.

Lumiere was going to the moors.

Chapter End Notes
Here's the prophecies Mal received from the Enchantress, just in case you've forgotten:

"You have such interesting stories." She complimented Mal. "I'm surprised they didn't mention these in your blessing." On her words, dozens of vivid, intense images blinded Mal. She saw swords clanging against each other, and thick black sands, and purple lizard scales, and churning green flames. There was a sound like bones shattering(Hasn't happened yet) and a sword snapping, and she felt intense heat(Hasn't happened) and palpable exhaustion. Other sensations filled her. She could feel herself draining what felt like(might be wrong) magic out of her body and she could feel betrayal, sharp and clear. She watched an entire desert melt into a lake of glass(Hasn't happened) and an entire city burn in green flames as black horses ran through the wreckage. She saw the Jolly Roger ship flying again just as it had years ago, and saw large buildings stretching towards the sky on the Isle of the Lost. Dark laughter echoed in her ears(Hasn't happened), pain filled her body(Hasn't happened), something unbelievably strong and powerful settled on her chest and suddenly it was all over and she was left staring into the enchantress's eyes as she gasped for breath.

More vivid images raced past her eyes, though they were much more comforting than the first wave of prophecies. Feelings of power and warmth raced through her. She glimpsed people she'd known on the Isle smiling, saw her friends momentarily, saw a world covered with white as she raced through it, and saw dozens of people she'd never met before. Two, in particular, took her breath away. One was of a dirty child on the Isle of the Lost, a brand-new baby that she was taking into the city. The other was of Belle taking a small child away into another room(Hasn't happened yet). It all happened so fast Mal couldn't tell whether the child was the same one, or which villain was their parent. The entire experience left her breathless. The enchantress smiled and patted her hand. "Good luck, Mal of the Isle, of Auradon, Exanton, and the Ancient Lands."
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Ben wakes up. Consultation with the FG, and Ben and Mal fight.

Chapter Notes

HAHAHAHAHAHAH you all have no idea how long I've waited for this moment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Truth be told, Ben had totally accepted that he was going to die and that the last thing he would ever see was his Mom's tear-filled eyes when he succumbed to the drugs. The next conscious memories he had were dark but clear. Pain; real, physical pain. So much pain. More than he'd ever felt before in his life, combined. He had wondered if death was supposed to feel like there was liquid fire pouring through his veins. He'd wished for a second death. The pain had been so bad that he had been sure his soul was going to shatter like glass.

There had been no light, no noise, only pain. He felt an intense pressure on his heart and felt burning from the wounds on his chest. He'd resigned himself to eternal burning, supposing he must have done something terribly wrong in life, and then he'd felt a cool touch to his brow, and it had brought him back down to earth. Then there were vivid, intense images. Images of a doomed girl on the Isle of the lost, of Maleficent, and of Mal starving to death.

Mal's memories. Somehow, he was seeing Mal's memories.

He hated it all. It was deplorable how she had grown up in this chaos when he had grown up in the palace. Sure, his childhood hadn't been perfect – his parents had fought almost constantly over how to raise him. Belle was determined to hold onto her baby for as long as possible while Adam had insisted on high school marks, long hours spent in-office, and accompanying his dad to as many meetings as possible. Ben wished things had been calmer and his parents hadn't made him live in such different worlds growing up, but at least he'd been warm. At least he'd been fed. At least he hadn't been born on the Isle of the Lost.

Mal's memories were persistent. He saw what he'd looked like when the glitter can had blown up in his face. He saw himself being held fast on Uma's ship as Mal took in her surroundings. He even saw himself in the dead of night, kissing Mal as she raked her fingers across his bare skin in pain; felt the tears sting her eyes as it faded in increments.

There were other things; many memories that twisted his gut and made him sick. Some were small things. He relived the moment Jay kissed Mal and felt the shock and disgust flood her body and felt her mind blank out. He felt her trying to figure out what was wrong with her as she was seized by panic the day she'd first come to Auradon. He felt her pain as her mother waved goodbye with a bright smile and echoed her fear of execution all the way to Auradon. He saw the Isle, felt the hunger, and heard the cries of people who she had later saved. There were still other, more recent memories. A line of white tests on the bathroom counter, a battle between Mal and Helena, and
Mal as a gigantic dragon, soaring over the Sea of Division with one thing on her mind: Ben.

Ben had never been so touched by his wife. Not when she put her anger aside to converse with him, not when she came back for him on Uma's ship, not even when she'd rejected the kingdom of Auradon, claiming it was Ben's to rule. She had truly flown the sea to find him, all by herself, and had still refused to let him die. He remembered all the wonderful memories they'd shared, from their wedding to her becoming queen, everything, and he had wished to go back to living with her.

And then there were the last two.

Ben had tried to shut out the horrible period in his life before he'd married Mal when she was happier and they were getting along, and he was sure he was going to become her personal monster in a matter of weeks. It had been hard, watching her come up with dozens of ideas and strategies, driving with her in the evenings, and then leaving her side and trying – trying – to forget everything.

And Maleficent… it would take him a while to wrap his head around that. She had cared? Cared like a proper parent? And that prophesying… absolutely insane.

No sooner had the last vision faded than the intense pain subsided, and the touch left his brow. He had immediately become aware of something churning in his body that he had no control over, and had faded away to sleep until now, when he felt himself waking up with a heavy weight on his chest. He opened his eyes and saw sunlight, bright and clear, streaming in through the window.

He did not move for several seconds. Then he looked down and saw a head of purple hair sitting on top of his ribs. Two small hands were curled into balls at his sides A warm feeling of awe overtook him.

Ben flexed his right hand and felt his fingers move against the sheets. His joints ached, but his fingers worked! He moved his arm and pain shot up the muscles in his arm, but he still moved it to wrap his arms around Mal and pull her up to rest on his shoulder. He bent his head and inhaled the scent of her hair. She did not smell very pretty – like smoke and sweat and leather – but her presence was like a soothing balm to his soul.

"You're awake," Someone said in shock. Ben looked up and saw Sophia, sitting in a chair beside the window with a book. Her eyes were wide as she examined him.

"I am." Ben confirmed.

Sophia shut her book and hurried to the bed. She wasn't wearing any shoes. Instead, her brown work boots that laced up to her thighs were sitting beside her chair. Sophia looked over the bedspread and reached out to brush Mal's hair out of her face. "She's still out." She muttered.

Ben pulled Mal closer. "What happened?" He asked Sophia.

Sophia shook her head. "She did it. Somehow… she-" She gestured from Mal to Ben, and sat down on the corner of the bed, unable to put into words what she wanted to say.

Ben raised a trembling hand up and examined it. "I – the sand is gone?" He asked. He could see grains on his hands and felt something underneath his skin, but it wasn't painful.

"Yes." Sophia nodded. "At least, that's what Rapunzel and the Fairy Godmother say. Mal has been asleep ever since, and she had most of the experience, so the details are a bit foggy for us." She exhaled and laid a hand on Mal's shoulder. "From what we've heard, she forced so much magic through your blood bond that she shattered it completely. She resorted to pushing magic directly
into your heart via her hands, almost drained herself, and then suddenly you regained color and began fighting the sand off on your own accord."

"Shattered Maleficent's curse?" Ben slowly pushed himself up as he tried to comprehend what this meant. Every muscle in his body was sore. He winced, but this was nothing compared to what he'd felt last night.

"It's gone." Sophia nodded. "The Fairy Godmother said that she snapped it and both ends dissolved and…" She bit her lip as tears filled her eyes. "The Fairy Godmother's wand melted with it."

Ben stared in shock at Sophia. "No." He whispered.

Sophia pulled back a corner of the covers and drew Ben's attention to a metallic melt on top of the sheets. A studded jewel sat on top of a mess of white, blue, and gold. Ben covered his mouth in shock.

"There's more." Sophia continued. "The kingdom is in an uproar. Five hundred video accounts of Mal, transformed as a dragon, found their way onto the interweb, including a crucial one of her appearing in front of the palace, turning back into herself, and rushing you, bloody and black inside. Evie, Jay, and Carlos have been calling every hour to talk to one of you, and meanwhile, Auradonian soldiers in the Overland are refusing to continue fighting until they receive word on you."

Ben swore and began to wrestle his way out of bed. It was an endeavor; every movement caused him pain. He felt like he'd ruined every muscle in his entire body. Ben disappeared into the closet and found a dark bathrobe that wasn't too hard to pull on and wasn't too tight so as to be uncomfortable and a pair of fleece pajama bottoms.

"What time is it, Sophia?" Ben asked, shuffling his way back into the bedroom.

"Almost seven in the morning. Everything ended yesterday morning. Mal's been asleep for over twenty-four hours. The press have been waiting outside all day," Sophia started. "Now, wait." She rushed to him. "We don't want you moving so quickly. You almost died yesterday, and you were strung up for two days before that. On top of that, are you… okay?" She brushed his shoulders off, lips pinched in worry.

"Sore," Ben admitted. "Every muscle hurts." He winced as he went to sit back down on the bed.

"Listen, Ben, I don't want you to panic, but you should be aware you don't exactly look the same as you did." Sophia whispered. She wrung her hands and looked at him nervously.

"What?" Ben asked. Sophia carefully reached forward and took his chin. Her thumb found a natural groove on the left side of his chin. Ben jumped back as if he'd been shocked. That felt weird. It was like he was being tickled.

"Go find a mirror," Sophia whispered as she sat down on the bed beside Mal and began to run her hands through the purple fairy's hair. Ben's feet hit the floor, and he shuffled out of the room and towards the bathroom. Stewart was lying spread out on the couch, snoring. No one else was in the room.

Ben opened the door and flipped on the light. He looked in the mirror and jumped back from the unfamiliar person he saw.

He was… pale, for starters. His skin was waxy and white. And his eyes were darker, almost a dark indigo. If he got the light to reflect on his irises right, they even looked purple. The roots of his hair
had gone darker too, though the majority of his hair was still the same color. It was the same length too, not longer or shorter. The color of the change only took up about an inch growing off his head, and something told him that it would continue to look like he'd dyed the roots as it grew.

The most alarming thing was the odd scar at the base of his chin. Ben rubbed his finger over it, and the odd ticking feeling brought tears to his eyes. It appeared to be made of small scales that had grown into his skin. Right over... where Helena had scratched him.

Ben ripped off his robe and stared at the long cuts, now covered with scales, like a reptile's. They were black, smooth to the touch, and extremely sensitive, just like Mal's wings when she'd first learned to grow them out. He hadn't even noticed it when he'd woken up and put on his robe.

Ben began to panic. "Oh my gosh," He muttered as he examined his body for any other changes. Ten fingers and toes? Check. He stuck out his tongue and smiled in the mirror. There was black lining on his teeth, but a quick rub with his finger revealed it would wash out. He ruffled his hair and watched in shock as a wave of black sand fell out of his locks. He balled his fists up and took several deep breaths and... felt something appear in his palm.

He looked down and discovered a small pile of dark blue sand that had appeared out of nowhere. He cautiously dumped it into the sink and then focused on his palm. It took a bit of strain on his aching muscles, but a new, small pile appeared in his hand.

"Oh my gosh!" He yelled and hurried back into the room. "Oh my gosh!"

"I know, it's a lot." Sophia tried to console him as she stood up.

"Look!" Ben held out his hand. Sand whirled around his fist but did not fall to the ground. It simply revolved around his hand in a spherical shape. Sophia's eyes grew as big as ping-pong balls and her mouth dropped open. Ben willed the sand back into his hand, and it did to his command, quickly vanishing into his skin.

"Mal!" Ben exclaimed, heading towards the bed where she slept face down and arms splayed out beneath her. He grabbed her shoulder and shook her lightly. "Mal, please wake up!" He begged as sweat broke out on his brow.

Mal jumped up onto her hands and knees after a few seconds and blinked at the covers. She looked lost. Ben knew the look – she sometimes had these moments where she was like a computer having to redownload herself. There had been times she woken up and stared at him in confusion as pieces came back slowly; she was queen, this was her husband, she wasn't on the Isle anymore. He wasn't sure she knew she did them, but it always fascinated him how her eyes would light up in realization when 'MalbetaX' finished downloading. He'd always assumed it was a side effect of everything changing so quickly.

The light came back into her eyes and she gasped as she whipped around to stare at him. "Oh my gosh!" She gasped. "You're awake! What are you doing out of bed? Are you alright?"

Ben took her hands and examined her. She didn't seem different at all. None of her colors had changed, nothing was new. She was tired and dirty, but still the same person. "Mal," he said seriously. "What happened?"

Mal's smile faded considerably. "We expelled the poisoning." She explained. "And saved your life." She squeezed his hands even as he pulled them out of her grasp carefully.

Ben held out a shaking hand and willed a small sandstorm into his palm. "Then what-" He gasped.
Mal stared in shock as the shimmering blue cloud grew thicker and thicker. She took another double look at Ben, examining the change in his hair and his new eye color and pallor, and then stared at the storm in his palm. Her eyes took on a green glow, and she seemed to go cross-eyed for a few seconds, almost as if she was looking at an entirely different view than Ben and Sophia were. "Oh my," She whispered. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Try again." The Fairy Godmother said with a frown. Her eyes were ringed with red from weeping over the loss of her wand, but she sat erect and professional as the royal family, plus Audrey, Sophia, Stewart and Jack Frost, who had been running back and forth with news from the front all night long without rest, stared at her intently.

Mal nodded and held a hand out for Ben again, palm up. Ben placed his hand, also palm-up, on top of hers and waited until Mal had reached over the coffee table they were sitting around and had taken the Fairy Godmother's hand before he conjured another sandstorm. The more he did it, the easier it seemed to become.

The Fairy Godmother's brow furrowed as she watched the sand whirl on Ben's palm. "How far can you manipulate it?" She asked.

Ben focused. With a bit of prodding and will, he was able to force the sand to take the shape of a misshapen star. Fairy Godmother turned to Mal. "And you say he looks just like you magically?"

"It's strange. Last night when I was working on him, he was almost invisible magically. Now, he glows as brightly as I do, but with a different texture and color." Mal furrowed her brow as she tried to explain what she was saying, withdrawing her hands and returning to the bowl of strawberries in between her thighs. "It looks like glass but still acts like sand." Ben swallowed dryly and wrung his hands in his lap.

The Fairy Godmother leaned towards him and put a hand up to his face. Ben flinched back and shut an eye as the Fairy Godmother drew a finger over his brow as she studied him. He swore he had been touched more in the last hours since waking up than he had in his entire life. His mom wanted to touch his face, his dad wanted to see the scars, and Mal just didn't want to let him go. "Let me guess," The Fairy Godmother murmured. "Dark indigo?"

"Exactly the color of the sand." Mal nodded, dropping the stem of the strawberry into the trash. "And his eyes."

"Common for them to match." Fairy Godmother shook her head. "Yours match; so do mine. For all, I can tell, we somehow managed to turn Ben into a magical."

"That's impossible," Belle whispered. "Neither Adam nor I are magical. There's no way he could have magical potential, and especially not surfacing at his age."

"Maybe you had a little and it never fully developed?" Fairy Godmother theorized out loud. "And that gave Ben a bit of standing ground that allowed him to utilize the magic Mal was giving him and-" Fairy Godmother stopped herself and thought some more. "Or, maybe it was simply the types of magic? Maybe the Overlands have a special adhesion property? Or perhaps the lasting connection between Ben and Mal."
"The two magics mixed." Mal supplied thoughtfully. "Before Mom's curse broke, I witnessed both the sands and my own fiery magic kind of… give up? And then they mixed, right over Ben's heart. That's how I knew I had to keep putting magic into his heart."

"But Ben didn't even react when you kept your hands on him." Fairy Godmother sat back down. "He was still dependent on you to keep feeding magic into him. This is an actual, independent force now. It was still something you were fueling last night until…" Fairy Godmother crunched her eyebrows together in thought. "Wasn't it when you collapsed?"

Ben gave Mal a wide look, who waved him off. "Actually, a question on that in just a minute." She pulled a foot up onto her lap. She was wearing black leggings and a purple shirt with a black sweater. Ben didn't like it. She still looked like she was wearing an Auradon catalogue, but she was tired and it was winter, so he was trying to reason with the voice in his head that was telling him it was wrong. "Yeah, the bond broke, I started using my hands and got carried away. Everything started flowing out of my hands and I almost drained myself. I let my head drop onto his and then I started having all these visions."

"Visions of what?" Ben interrupted, snapping to attention and staring at her. It was the first thing he'd said in a while. Mal looked surprised. "What did you see?" He demanded.

"Did you… see it too?" Mal asked slowly. "With the Isle and Maleficent and-" Her face went a little pale. "Oh. You and your parents."


"You never told me?" Mal demanded. She didn't really sound angry, just… confused. "How did you even keep me from noticing?"

"There are things you haven't been telling me either," Ben shot back, giving her a look. Mal fell back, silenced and guilty. He shook his head. "We'll talk later," He muttered.

Mal turned to Fairy Godmother. "I… I think that must have been it. Whatever happened when we shared our memories… that is what did it."

Fairy Godmother buried her face in her hands. "I have no idea." She said softly. "All I can really tell you without my wand is that Ben is definitely a mage of sands now." She stood up. "Excuse me, please." She whispered and disappeared into the hallway.

Ben stared at his hands in defeat. Mal nudged him with her foot. "You okay?" She whispered.

Ben turned his hands over and then examined his palm. A blue mound appeared without him having to think about it. His eyes filled with tears. "No." He shook his head. "Look at this. I have sand magics and dark magics."

"I thought you liked magic?" Mal asked with a raised eyebrow and a frown.

"I like your magic!" Ben exploded. His voice made goosebumps rise up on Mal's arms and Audrey jumped. "This? This is death magic. What if I scratch you or Madison or Mom or Dad trying to give them a handshake or hug or anything and they die?"

"Doubtful." Mal cut his rant off. "Magic is intent-based as well as spell-based. Helena wanted to kill you. The scratches would have been perfectly fine if she hadn't wanted you to die."

Audrey reached over and patted Ben's back. "We're here for you, Ben." She whispered. "It doesn't
matter if you have powers or what kind they are."

"Being afraid of yourself won't help anything either," Mal said, pushing a large, red strawberry into Ben's grasp. "Remember Elsa? And Ben, babe, you have to take care of yourself otherwise you'll be crankier than I am. Your body is still trying to catch up to everything that happened last night."

Ben twisted the top off a strawberry without a word as Stewart snorted. "You? Cranky?" He asked. "You might be the most level-headed one here."

"Oh, I'm pissed," Mal growled. "I'm just on a recharge break."

"What really happened the last two days, Mal?" Ben asked softly.

Mal's eyes grew a little dark. She bit her cheek. "The message you'd been captured came late. We were at the table for dinner, I walked out and was gone in an hour."

"Just like that?" Ben asked.

"Just like that." Mal nodded. "Adam yelled at me, said I couldn't go because I was queen, yada-yada, pregnant, yada-yada, and I went anyways." She twisted the top of a strawberry. Ben frowned at her words but kept his mouth shut. "I drove your car to Kuzko's palace, debated flying over with my purple wings, remembered Mom could turn into a dragon and thought that'd be a better method of transportation, and I crossed the sea and made it to the Overland as the sun was coming up. Jack shot me down off the coast, I interfered with the war council by locating you using our blood anchor and then returned to dragon form to fly to what-the-place."

Mal paused to take a breath and gather her thoughts. "I was so angry… I don't remember much." She admitted. "I flew to the city and Helena came out to see me. We threatened each other, she brought the guards out, I lit their horses on fire and went after her. She had your sword, I blew my top at her and scared her into the next century, and after she disappeared, I went to find you. I made Jack ride with me back here, the Fairy Godmother and Doctor Scott gave a prognosis, and I called Rapunzel. We did this crazy three-way magic thing and I was so tired afterward that I fell asleep. Et voila."

Mal chewed on her lip in thought. "I need to ask the Fairy Godmother something." She stood up and went to the door, but not before she kissed Ben on the head. "I like you no matter how you look." She promised him. Then she went and disappeared through the doors.

Stewart slid forward on his seat. "It must be hard." He reasoned.

Ben grunted. "What will I do?" He asked. "Auradon needs me."

The doors opened again. Lumiere appeared with a wide grin on his face that only grew larger when he saw Ben. "You're up!" He exclaimed. "And so soon afterward too! What great news. Is Mal in here?" He looked around for the purplette.

"No." Ben shook his head. "She just left to find Fairy Godmother. She'll be back soon."

"You're happy." Belle smiled sadly.

Lumiere spread his arms. "The moors are now at war." He announced.

Ben's face fell slack, as did everyone else's. "What?" He asked.

"Queen Mal asked me to journey to the moors and announce a war against the villains of the
Overland." Lumiere smiled. "Everyone is getting ready to head up to the Overland. I believe this is what some would refer to as a turning point in the war."

Jack floated a few feet off his chair with a bright smile. "Excellent." He said.

"I thought Mal was going to keep them out of war?" Ben asked. "Unless something really bad – oh." He stopped, looking down at himself. "She brought the moors to war over me?"

"She means for retribution," Jack explained. "You all should have seen her storming into the council room. She was in there for a total of five minutes and had everyone's heads spinning. She walked in, told them where you were, explained she was going to kick your butt for letting yourself be captured, and then walked right back out and flew away without even telling up to do anything."

"Retribution?" Ben asked softly.

"I am going to tear Helena limb from limb," Mal said as she re-entered the room. The Fairy Godmother was still not with her. Mal sat down beside Ben and dug her nails into her knees. "Are the moors at war?" She asked Lumiere, who nodded. "Excellent." She smiled. "I suppose I'd better head up there, then?"

Ben whipped around. "Head up there?" He asked.

"Yes." Mal nodded. "Helena is afraid of me. Her parents aren't expecting me, and the moors are a collection of fighters unlike anyone they've ever seen before."

"Mal." Ben took her hands and pleaded with her. "Please, don't go. I've already gone and it's awful. I was captured by Eris herself when she pretended to be someone else. I couldn't stand it if something horrible happened to you or the baby."

Mal looked like she might listen up until he mentioned she was pregnant. Now she wasn't even concerned about sugar-coating it for him. She stuck a finger in his face. "I do not care about the baby." She rolled her eyes. "F-I-N-E. Pregnant girls on the Isle would still leap around and climb buildings and do all sorts of stuff and I am not going to hang out doing nothing just because. I have a war to fight and vengeance that needs to be wrought." Her eyes softened as she looked at Ben. "But I'll stay a few days if it makes you feel better." She promised. "Will you be coming back up?"

Ben stared at his hands, knowing without trying the power he could summon. He shook his head. "I just want to stay home." He admitted, sinking into the chair. "I just want to stay here and run the kingdom without worrying about battle schemes and death rates and-" He broke off and buried his face in his hands.

Mal gave him a hug. "Stay here and get better then." She advised. "I'll call every night if you want?"

Ben nodded solemnly and pulled his feet up onto the couch cushion, so he could wrap his arms around his legs and become a ball.

"We still have reporters outside." Adam reminded them. "What should we do about that?"

Ben flinched. When he'd woken up, he'd been more than ready to go out and meet them. Now, however, the last thing he wanted to do was show them his new face.

Mal drummed her fingers on her leg. "I can call Elias, the man who interviewed me and do a small thing wherever he is." She offered.
"I think a speech would be better," Belle advised.

"You're probably right." Mal nodded. Her lower lip came out as she thought. "I'm just not… ready to give all the details. Maybe one day I'll tell Auradon everything, but not today." She looked at Audrey. "We hadn't even told you about our anchor, had we?" She asked. Audrey shook her head.

Ben sat up. "I owe you an apology." He sighed. "I… stretched the truth when I told you what was happening. Maleficent actually cursed the crowns to Auradon before she was sent to the Isle and a curse was passed down onto Mal and I. That's why Mal was brought from the Isle."

Audrey blinked. "Wow," She whispered. She looked up at Mal. "You got so lucky to get someone like her that way." She told Ben.

Ben broke into the first real laugh he'd laughed all day. "I know." He assured Audrey. "And I thank God for her every day."

Auradonian reporters swarmed the steps of the palace as Audrey and Mal stepped outside into the flashing cameras. They waved shyly, and Mal took guard behind Audrey as the pink-dressed girl crossed her arms, Isle-style, and called for silence. She smiled for the camera and cleared her throat. "Hello, Auradon," She told a blinking camera. "This is Audrey, daughter of Aurora and Phillip speaking, and the crown has asked me to forward Queen Mal of the Isle, the Moors, and Auradon in a quick message to the citizens. This message will briefly cover the dragon that has been sighted in Auradon, the battle on the Overland, the King's current health status and a few other small items of business. Thank you." She stepped backward and gestured to Mal, who tossed her dark purple hair over her shoulder and stepped onto the second-highest step.

Mal swallowed and looked at the ground for a few seconds before she looked into the camera and began to speak. "Two days ago, in the evening, palace officials including Former Queen Belle and King Adam received word from the Overland that King Benjamin Florian Benson had been captured while preparing for an invasion. I, the queen, his wife, left immediately thereafter. Upon arriving at the coast I taught myself to morph into a dragon before I traveled to the Overland. I was able to recover Ben and bring him back to Auradon."

Cameras flashed and cameramen hushed reporters with pencils who mumbled as they scribbled things down. Mal swallowed. "As many of you saw in a video, he was badly injured. A woman by name of Helena Aparate Troy who possessed sand powers had clawed him and given him magical poisoning, which many of you may remember as the thing that killed my mother." Mal swallowed and choked back a hiccup as her eyes watered from the bright sunlight. "He came close to death, but through careful maneuvering, the Fairy Godmother, Rapunzel of Corona, and I managed to reverse the effects of Troy's magic. Ben is on the road to recovery.

"I have made the decision to travel north while my husband heals. The moorlands have entered the war and I will be leading them alongside Auradon troops, which I have permission from both kings of Auradon to do." Mal paused and pursed her lips. "I will return to Auradon in March at the latest, regardless of the war's status. The king would like me to be nearby as we await the arrival of our first child."

There was a general outcry and Mal was almost blinded by the cameras. She flinched back. People were shouting and exchanging incredulous looks. "Ben will remain in Auradon while he recovers," She continued, raising her voice over the noise. "I may or may not return to the Overlands in the summer after our child is born." She carefully avoided touching her stomach as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a document printed on muted yellow paper.
"The King has also asked me to read this statement regarding every citizen in Auradon," She
announced. "It is to be regarded as a proclamation until it is officially instated next week." Mal
smoothed it out, squinted, and read it aloud as best she could. "Due to the state of war in Auradon,
I, Benjamin Florian Benson, do hereby declare the use of all magicks, enchantments, and
spellcasting to be perfectly legal insomuch that they do not infringe on the Auradonian's right to
Happily Ever After as stated by the End of War Manifesto until war has been adjourned or until
this statement is revoked or improved upon. Misuse of magic or deliberate attacks will come with
consequences."

Mal bit her lip to keep from crying tears of joy as she folded the paper up again and stared into
the cameras. "So be it henceforth." She concluded. "Thank you for your time."

As reporters exploded with questions, Mal turned and walked back to the doors. Audrey held them
open for her as she disappeared inside and away from the cameras.

Moorland creatures that had previously prepared for war with Auradon now marched north to
battle alongside them. The news of what had happened to Ben – what Mal had done – shook them.
They'd been loyal to her before for simply saving them, but with this new information that she'd
been able to burn an incurable disease out of someone's system, they were rallying behind her
power. Auradon, however, not so much.

Mal dodged crowds on her way to the Isle to assure them that they wouldn't be joining the fight just
yet. She brought back Ben's things that had been hidden there and made a promise to her people –
she was going to create a way for them to visit Auradon and the Moorlands. Not immigrate just
yet, but travel.

She returned later in the evening but ignored the closed gates as she flew right over them and
landed in front of the palace. People filmed her as she went and several shouts rang out, but she
ignored them all.

Mal could hear Ben listening to some news reel when she opened the door to their bedroom. She
brushed her teeth and then walked through the bedroom to her closet, shutting the door to change.
Ben was sitting on their bed, examining something on his phone. She ignored the introduction as
she located her pajamas, but then slowed her movements as the words drifted through the door.

"At this point, we have to consider the basis of what is happening," An announcer began in a slow,
disappointed tone. "A seventeen-year-old girl will be leading a war. A seventeen-year old! How
preposterous! That idea alone is bombastic! Not even taking into account how she is pregnant,
Queen Mal should not be going north – regardless of how powerful she is!"

Mal frowned and shoved her feet into some socks. She swung the door open and furrowed her
brow in the direction of Ben, who hadn't given any sign that he knew she had entered. Mal walked
over and ran her hands through his hair before dropping her fingers and running her thumb along
the groove in his chin. She wanted to see if it was shrinking at all, but it seemed to be the exact size
and shape as when it had formed. Ben pulled his chin out of her grasp, furrowing his brow at the
prickling feeling, and continued examining what she now assumed was a protest.

"That's not to say she should be left to lead!" The announcer continued, brandishing a finger at the
crowd. He was a tall man with oiled hair and small black glasses pushed up on his nose. "She's
already proved that seventeen-year-olds cannot rule kingdoms on their own – hence why the law
states the minimum age should be twenty-two. We assumed she would be capable from what we
had witnessed of her on the Isle and in the Moors, but it seems Mal only has the ability to raise forgotten kingdoms up; not to keep them running normally without passing laws to keep people away from her. We never should have allowed the country to be left on a teenager's shoulders!"

Ben let out a long breath through his nose while Mal's brow hunched together in hurt. She hovered at his side, trying to block out the awful words Ben seemed to be engrossed in.

"She doesn't have her priorities straight! King Ben has already been attacked and now she will leave Auradon on a sick man's shoulders and endanger the future of the kingdom because she can't deal with the politics of Auradon! She is fleeing from issues she created! And Ben – he will let her! He's never tried to control her; the reports of magic in Auradon and this recent proclamation only prove that. He's not strong enough to control his wife – much less lead a war!"

Mal shook her head. How could anyone listen to this fool? Was he still stuck in the stone age, where women were property to be… controlled? What did he think their relationship was like? She tried again to pull Ben's attention away from the feed, but he was acting so… distant. She sat down beside him and put her head against his shoulder, hoping he'd get the hint. All the while, the man's voice reverberated into her skull.

"Mal may have been able to perform a rescue mission but can we reasonably expect a teenager to keep her countries, – plural! – our own children, and her baby – the future of all Auradon! – safe? The war is a costly expense to Auradon; one that our leaders aren't ready for and one that we shouldn't stand for any-"

"Can you turn that off?" Mal demanded finally, sitting back up and grabbing Ben's forearm. He jumped a little as if she'd startled him out of a daze and then fumbled with the off switch. She heard him mumble an apology as he set his phone back down on the bed and then twisted his hands a little before clasping them in his lap. Mal furrowed her brow at him. He used to always reach for her, before he left for north. "We don't need to know how badly Auradon hates us," She began tersely. "They're wrong anyway. They don't have all the information, and-"

"Mal, I agree with them," Ben interrupted, keeping his hands pressed tightly together and his eyes on the floor. The floor still hadn't been fixed and the ceiling would need to be repainted, but everything was almost as is with the exception of the overwhelming presence of Mal's magic in the room.

Mal blinked at him in shock. The first thing that came to mind was the announcer's voice: "He's not strong enough to control his wife!" It brought her right back to when she was standing in his office and Adam was screaming at her about how Ben "had the most powerful person in his grasp."
"Well," She tried to keep the hiss out of her tone as she spoke, "that's disgusting."

"Don't you?" Ben asked, turning to face her with an unreadable expression.

"No!" Mal snapped, sliding off the bed and taking a step away from him. "They're spewing lies! How can you believe a single word?"

"I don't want you to go," Ben told her, running a hand through his hair. "I just failed and I don't want you to get hurt. I'd rather you stay here; safe."

"You didn't fail, and I won't get hurt," Mal said slowly, putting her hands on her hips.

"That's exactly what I said!" Ben snapped. "Lonnie's a better general – she can keep everyone safe. I'll recover and we can stay here… together."
"While hundreds die?" Mal reminded him. Ben's face contorted in anger.

"It's better than you dying or losing our baby!" He declared, reaching out and grabbing her wrist. He used her weight momentarily to get to his feet and then took both of her hands in a vice-like grip. Mal shook her hands to try to get him to let go.

"So, that's what this is about?" She snapped. "You and your mother don't even care about me or the kingdoms or anything other than this stupid baby!"

"Don't bring my mom into this – this is about us!" Ben shook his head. "Listen, Mal, let's keep out of the North. You don't need revenge – Auradon doesn't even want us to go! I know you want to get back at Helena but can't we just let it go? Can't you just stay here with me? Please?"

"That's the selfish thing to do," Mal reprimanded in a biting tone. Ben flinched back in hurt, but his response was immediate and cutting.

"Says the girl who passed four laws to keep people from complaining to her," he hissed. It was probably the cruelest thing she had ever heard come out of his mouth. She ripped her hands away and shoved him hard into his nightstand. He was still weak, so he landed against it, but she didn't feel bad.

"I was dying!" She yelled. She was actually yelling at him now; they were fighting and it felt horrible. "I hadn't slept in days because I was trying to balance everything. The Isle needed me and I could never go because Auradon was working me to the bone! I couldn't go anywhere or do anything; I would miss every single meal every day and I still couldn't do things up to 'Ben's standard'!"

"You should have asked for help," Ben chided with his own voice growing to a shout. His dark indigo eyes swirled with sand magic and little particles started spinning around him. "Not turned my dad into a monster. I thought you were going to take care of things?"

His voice rang in her ears. He's accusing her; why is she being accused? He gave her permission to change things… encouraged it, really. "You know what, Adam was right!" She snapped. "You only wanted me to stay behind and play housekeeper!"

Ben balked at the description. "What?" He gasped, anger vanishing from his tone. "I wanted you to… to…"

"You just wanted to keep me here, where you knew I was safe. All those things you said about making Auradon better were lies, weren't they?" She glared at him as he brushed sand off of his hands. He is good at control, but even she lets out a little lose magic when she gets angry.

"No, they weren't," he denied. "I thought you would still be able to go to the Isle and the Moors. I thought… I thought you'd be able to do it."

The way he phrased it made it sound like she was a failure. 'You should have been able to do this, but you chose not to'. It goes through her like a knife and makes her eyes tear up. Mal balled her fists up.

"Well, I thought you cared about me and not just about the baby. I guess we were both wrong," she spat.

Her words hurt him. He sat down on the nightstand, looking devastated, and stared at her like he forgot who she was and is just now remembering. "Mal," He whispered, "I do care about you."
"You sure have a funny way of showing it," She grumbled and turned her back to him. It was easier to not see him. She didn't want to hear his diplomatic excuses right now.

"I just want you to be safe!" Ben seized her hands and forced her to turn back around to him. "Is that so bad?"

"Not even a year ago, you just wanted me to be happy," Mal chided. "You said that even if I decided to leave, you'd still love me. Remember? Because there's a difference between loving someone and loving to have someone around? You promised I wouldn't ever be trapped again – that there would be no more prisoners in Beast's Castle. You promised you'd never stop me from leaving."

"That was before I knew we were going to have a family," Ben squeezed her hands, begging her to see reason. "Before, you were just walking out on me. Now, you're walking out on both of us, Mal. I'm trying to keep you safe and them safe and you happy and them happy. Can you stop being so selfish and think about that? I'm trying to think about what's best for my family because that's what parents do!"

"I don't want to be a parent!" Mal exploded, ripping her hands from his and hitting his chest with both fists in a random act of rage before she slumped her forehead into his chest. "I don't… I hate this, Ben."

"You think I don't know that?" Ben pushed her back, rubbing the area where she'd hit him and frowning at her. There is no comfort there. "I don't know how you managed to fool me that entire month – I thought you were okay. I don't even know how Mom and Dad are still fooled because it's so obvious!"

"I'm tired, Ben," Mal hissed. The tears leak past her eyes and burn her skin as they fall. She was in so, so much pain and he was standing there so close and yet so far because they're fighting. They've never really fought before. She's overreacted, sure, but he's been patient and they've always gotten through it. Mal supposed she'd finally reached the end of Ben's rope, but she still needed him to understand. "I don't have time for this and now everyone wants me to stay home and play house. Even those news people; even Belle; even you! You're all trying to control me!"

"I'm not trying to control you," Ben protested. "I'm-"

"You just agreed with that man who said you can't control me well enough," Mal pointed out in a flat tone, cutting off all of his arguments.

It took Ben a few seconds. The lies must have gone right over his head, deep as he was in thinking. "I wasn't agreeing with that part," He began and then Mal cut in again.

"Oh, were you agreeing with the part about how I can't rule? You've already said you think I failed," She crossed her arms, and then Ben is on the retreat a little.

"I spoke too quickly," He sighed, shaking his head. "I'm sure you were doing the right thing."

Mal turned away. "You're only saying that because I'm mad now," She sighed.

"No, Mal, I haven't even looked at those laws yet." He pressed a hand to his head and closed his eyes. "I have no idea what you wrote. I was just repeating."

"Your mom?" Mal challenged. There was no verbal response; Ben opened his eyes and realized his mistake in trusting a woman still sore over Mal dealing her cruel justice. She looked away, towards the window, and tried her best to not watch for his movements in her peripherals. "I know you
really need my help right now," she began slowly, "but I need yours too. This isn't really my dream. You have no idea what it's like on the Isle - people die from this. I've sat with people as they died from this. Young girls who thought their boyfriends meant forever, people who weren't given choices. Or there's strategem. People get pregnant so they have someone who will keep them safe when they're older and so they have leverage over their partners. And I come to Auradon and it's a responsibility and pride. And the moorlands consider it a necessity, almost. It's just hard to adjust and-" Mal sat down hard on the bed and braced her arms on her knees. "I'm seventeen. I'm small. What if I die? And if I live, I have this responsibility that I, frankly, am not ready for. Look at me, Ben. I just barely got the Isle and the moors under control. I let you touch me and it felt wonderful, and for a few days I wasn't afraid of anything, and now I've got to figure out how I'm supposed to deal with the entire kingdom judging me for being as young as I am and watching me raise my kid and - oh god, I'll have to raise a kid." She shook her head and buried her face out of sight.

Ben put a hand on her back hesitantly. His expression was dark. "You won't die." He told her. "You're too powerful to just... die. And we'll have doctors and nurses around."

Mal shook her head. "I don't want doctors and nurses." She insisted. "That brings up a whole different list of Isle flashbacks."

Ben huffed in a way that told Mal he thought she'd come around. She pursed her lips. "You bring them within a mile of me and I'll lock you out of the room." She warned him. He scoffed again, and Mal didn't press the threat. Instead, she took a deep breath. "Ben, I really need your help right now, and you're judging me and attacking me and making decisions for me. I just don't feel like I can do this."

He swallowed. "So, what then?" He asked. "Are you just going to... stop it?" His voice cracked, and he had to cough a little.

"I can't." Mal shook her head, feeling forlorn. "Auradon already knows, remember? I can only imagine the backlash that would get. And anyway, I wouldn't do that to you, and I couldn't do that to me."

Ben breathed a sigh of relief, and guilt slipped onto Mal's stomach. She had made him worry. She had probably made him sick with the idea.

"So then, what are you going to do?" Ben asked, sitting down and putting his arm around her back. But now that she had the contact, she didn't want it.

"Nothing," Mal reported. She wrapped her arms around her ribcage and got to her feet. "What can I do? I just have to wait it out and hope I'm strong enough to deal with it."

"What can I do?" Ben asked, jumping up behind her and inadvertently cutting off the path to the door. "What do you need? I can-"

"Please, stop!" Mal cut him off as angry, stressed tears burned her eyes. "You and everyone constantly reminding me of this is making everything ten times harder! I just want to ignore it. I know I'm not delicate but hey, you get knocked up and suddenly you're a flower!" She took a deep, ragged breath. "Just let me be me. Just let me... pretend everything is normal until it can't be anymore. I just - I want to ignore it."

Ben was at a loss of what to say. His hands fell limply at his sides. "I'm sorry." He whispered.

Mal took a little breath and held her hands up as if that was going to make the words bounce off of her and away. "Me too." She exhaled. "I guess it really wasn't the right time. I should have figured
That out before we got into this mess.” She sidestepped him and headed for the door, shaking her head and taking deep breaths to console herself. Ben listened for the click of the doorknob. Something told him she wouldn’t be coming back tonight.

She did, but it was at two thirty in the morning, when he was lying awake and spinning sandstorms around his hand. It was reflective, so he could see the odd, dim light his eyes were giving off in the glints of the sand. It was horribly fascinating; the way something so rough could appear so smooth.

He heard the door open and dropped his hand and rolled onto his side. Mal stepped around the frame, looking downcast. She glanced over at him and it was only then that Ben thought to close his eyes. From her little breath of disappointment, he could tell she’d seen the light from his eyes.

She went to her side and straightened the covers that had been jostled from his tossing and turning, pulled them back, and then let out an irritated sigh. She picked up her pillow and then one of the decorative ones they usually put on the floor during the night and left again, shutting the door behind her.

Somehow, her decision hurt more than anything either of them had said that day.

Chapter End Notes

"One last small thing.” Mal held up a hand. "Tell Audrey to be thinking on what she wants. Specifically, tell her to think of who will rule Auroria if she leaves. Phillip and Aurora are getting old, and they'll want to retire soon."

"You make it sound like you already know she'll leave.” Ben chuckled as he tucked everything he'd taken out and strewn on the counter back in the folder. Mal said nothing. He looked down at her and saw her biting her cheek in thought. "Oh," Ben said. "Is it... for sure then?"

-------

"I'm just angry." Audrey sighed. "I don't want to have to choose, but... if I'm not Queen, then what was I even born and raised to be in the first place? I can't just walk away from responsibility."

"You're a queen without the crown," Mal assured her. "We get to choose what we want to be. We forge our own paths and choose our own destiny. What do you want yours to be?"

Audrey kicked a rock down the street. "I guess... I don't know. I don't want to leave here..." She trailed off, biting her bottom lip. Mal didn't add on at all.

Three young men were standing at the corner of a building next to the small park, talking as Mal and Audrey started to walk past them. One was holding onto a small tree's branch as he laughed with his friends. He had brown hair with sideburns and pretty brown eyes. He was dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and tan pants with many pockets. As Audrey and Mal walked past, the former with her arms still crossed,
his hand shot out and seized her upper arm. He pulled her into his embrace and went down with a knee, dipping her low to the ground.

Mal tensed and spun on her heel the moment Audrey disappeared from her side. She watched, alarmed, as the young man held an arm firmly around her. "Well, it's not every day I get a pretty young lady falling into my-" He started with a comfortable smirk. He was interrupted by a loud crack.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Mal travels to Corona, Cinderellasburg, and the Isle. She and Ben talk magic, Godparents, and war. Mal leaves for north. Chad is called out in front of the war council and Cinderella travels to the Isle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mal traveled the hour to Corona to thank Rapunzel with a hug, a large container of hazelnut soup - which Rapunzel apparently adored - and a lantern with the phrase 'I've got a dream' on it. She felt like it was fitting. When she arrived, the kingdom was crowded. Cars were parked within inches of each other and carriages made of canvas, wood, metal or glass were stopped practically on top of each other. She stopped on the outskirts and hiked up to the castle, weaving through crowds, Before long, it was clear what was going on - Hundreds of people had traveled to take advantage of the Queen's legal ability to use her magic.

Mal discovered the queen sitting on the front steps of her palace with her hair unraveled down through the front gates of the palace walls, all the way out into Corona. Rapunzel sang and people with injuries of every size - from cuts on their hands to disfigured and malformed limbs - came to her to touch her hair and feel the healing power course through them.

As Mal walked through the palace gates, she heard a little boy calling out for his mother as he dashed past her with a pair of now-retired crutches in his hands. "Mama! Mama!" He called, jumping for joy.

Rapunzel stood when she saw the purplette appear in the courtyard. "Mal!" She called with tears in her eyes as she ran to throw her arms around her. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," She sobbed as she fell to her knees with her arms locked around Mal's waist.

Mal, too, dropped to her knees and squeezed Rapunzel tightly. "Oh, thank you, thank you for saving him," She cried. She was aware that dozens of people probably had their cell phones out, were probably filming this as they spoke, but it was okay.

Mal withdrew, ruffling out her newly short hair. It had been getting too long again, so she'd cut it at the nape of her neck. No more gold streaks. She was donating her hair to a place that helped kids with infirmities like cancer, magical poisoning, and various types of incurable viruses. Long hair would be cumbersome on the battlefield anyways.

Mal presented her gifts with tears in her eyes. "These are for you." She offered. Rapunzel took them, looking touched. As she smoothed out the lantern, and read the description, her eyes filled with more tears. "He's my dream," Mal sniffled to explain. "And I know you're one of the only princesses who knows what it's like to watch a dream almost die in front of you. I'll never be able to thank you enough."

Rapunzel wiped her eyes. "Let's call it even," She recommended. "I'll never be able to thank you enough for all of this." She gestured around her to everyone in the courtyard who stood to wonder
Mal chuckled, and the two queens shook hands before Mal left for her second destination.

Mal doubled around to Cinderellasburg before she returned to the palace. Upon arriving, she knocked and was let in by a guard with a tall, funny hat. "You may wait here for the king and queen." She was told.

The Charming's castle was lovely. The entrance hall was light blue, and circular, with two luxurious staircases climbing the outskirts of the walls and meeting underneath a gigantic portrait of Queen Ella, King Charming, and Prince Chad.

A door underneath the portrait opened and Queen Ella appeared in a luxurious blue gown. She hurried to the staircase barrier and looked down at Mal. "Your highness," She said in surprise. "What brings you here to us today?" She hurried down the stairs and dipped into a small bow as she hit the bottom of the steps.

"You don't need to bow to me." Mal chuckled. "And I'm here on a sort of… developmental question."

"Which is?" Ella asked with a soft smile.

"I want to find Anastasia's husband, and figure out the best way to reunite him with his wife, should he still wish it after all these years." Mal explained, tapping her foot on the floor.

Queen Ella looked entirely astonished. "Rob Paulsen is his name." She explained. Her face fell downcast. "He was heartbroken when they took Anastasia. It had already been five years since they'd married, and they were trying to have children together. He petitioned the high palace for years for her release, but I haven't heard from him in a few years now."

"Do you have an address?" Mal asked patiently.

"I might." Ella shrugged. "Come, let's see." She waved Mal to the side of the room, where a door was hidden in front of the staircase. They walked through and began traveling down a long corridor. "What are you thinking to reunite them, given they're different citizens?" Ella asked.

"I was hoping you'd agree to sanction Anastasia, or I can sanction Rob," Mal explained.

Ella hesitated. "We'll have to speak on it, of course." She smiled tactfully. Mal knew she was worried about the persecutions that would arise against the two if the case was publicized.

They entered a room not far down the hallway that was small, about three times the size of a normal coat closet, with the oldest computer Mal had ever seen sitting on the desk. It had a bright blue screen and was white and boxy, completely unlike the sleek, black screens at Beast's Castle. A man with balding hair sat behind the screen, scribbling on a paper.

"Alex?" Ella asked, putting a hand on the man's shoulder. "Can you see if you can find an address for Rob Paulsen?"

Alex grunted and began to shake the computer's mouse as he tried to bring up a record-finding page. Mal pursed her lips as she fidgeted, waiting for the computer to boot up. After about ten minutes of complete silence and nervous fidgeting, Alex grunted again. "Nothing." He said. "I have newspaper articles and past residencies, but nothing new for the last eight years."

Queen Ella looked alarmed. "Thank you, Alex. We need to find him immediately."
Mal ran a hand through her short hair. "Can I leave that to you?" She asked.

Ella nodded with a flush. "Of course. I don't know why we don't know where he is, but we'll find him immediately."

Alex tapped an intercom on his desk. "Hey, Marc?" He asked.

"Yeah, Alex?" A gruffer voice came through the other end, mixed with more than a fair amount of static.

"See if you can find a Rob Paulsen. Anyway, as soon as possible."

"You got it, boss," Marc replied. The line went dead.

Mal backed up. "I'll show myself out." She whispered and disappeared out the door.

"The Isle is almost completely functional." Evelyn smiled as she flipped her tablet screen around. "Kids are attending school four days a week. Most adults have five or six-day jobs, and everything slows on Sunday for a rest day. The tablets you brought from Auradon are really helping. I took the liberty of organizing family accounts and now everything is programmed into groups based on where people live. Accounts with financial holdings cannot be merged to protect from domestic abuse that way, and the Isle has paid back forty percent of its debt to Auradon by shipping goods there and back from the people who build and make things here, and we're slowly gaining an infrastructure."

"That's amazing." Mal smiled. "So, that's it? We have a regular running kingdom now?"

"That's it." Evelyn smiled. "Congratulations. You built a kingdom in less than a year. Now we just have to work on improving it."

Mal nodded. "And I do have plans. I want to hire our build squad to start building a bigger dock down here, past the harbor and away from the beach. I'm going to take more of that uninhabited land over here and start expanding into the abandoned sections of the Isle. We're going to have water-cleaning machines to keep the oceans nice. And that nature-y area the moor-women began, I want to expand into a park with this thing called a playground for smaller children."

"I know what a playground is." Evelyn rolled her eyes. "I think we should focus on home-production though. It'll be more beneficial to start setting up workplaces and places we can forge and build things in so that we're not always importing from Auradon. I've already drawn up plans."

Mal considered this. "You're right." She nodded. "It's obvious we'll never be able to oust Auradon in terms of raw materials; they're just a bigger area than we are. But if we buy raw goods, manufacture them here, and resell to Auradon…"

"We'll gain the upper hand on their production since Auradon is lazy. We'll get rich over their want of nice things without work." Evelyn smirked. "Are you trying to encourage battle with your husband?"

"Sure." Mal laughed. "He'll understand. Anything else pressing right now?" She asked.

"Nope. I'll send you plans when I get them. Why don't you go out and see how things are?" Evelyn folded her tablet down into a touchscreen and began tapping away.

Mal smiled and nodded. She walked outside Evelyn's office and was nearly barreled down by
Audrey, who was chasing a small child around with a wide smile. "Oh!" Mal exclaimed. "I was wondering where you were. I didn't see you when I came down to the wharf this morning."

"I've been here since yesterday." Audrey huffed as she came to a stop. "I didn't even know you were here."

"Shocking," Mal said. "Word usually spreads."

Audrey laughed. "Yeah. You'd think the whole dragon thing would have caused everyone to blow their tops when you stepped off the gangplank."

Mal laughed and examined Audrey. Audrey was wearing a paint-splattered t-shirt and long pants. Now that it was November, cold air was starting to travel through to the Isle. People no longer lounged around in short sleeves and swishy skirts. "Have you just started… living here?" She asked.

Audrey's smile fell a little. "Sort of." She shrugged. "Like, I still go back, and I know I have to be queen one day, but… lots of my stuff is here."

Mal folded her arms. "Let's walk a minute." She said and gestured to the door to the building. Audrey nodded, and the two women headed outside.

"Ben okay?" Audrey asked as they headed down the street.

"He says he is, but he's still struggling," Mal whispered. "He's worried about me leaving."

"Isn't everyone?" Audrey asked.

"Sophia isn't." Mal argued. "Neither is Fairy Godmother, Rapunzel, or Lumiere."

"You know, when Ericka said maybe we should sic you at the Overland Villains, she wasn't aware you were pregnant." Audrey raised an eyebrow.

"Doesn't matter." Mal digressed in a sour tone. "What do your parents think of you always being here, on the Isle?"

Audrey's face fell. "They're… worried, of course. But they say they're proud of me."

"Do you really want to be Queen of Auroria?" Mal whispered.

Audrey crossed her arms. "I don't know what I want." She sighed. "But I understand being queen is a full-time job, and I won't always be able to run off to the Isle all the time."

"Can you work with staying inside and running things the rest of your life now that you know what this is like?" Mal asked, gesturing around her.

"I don't have to be a queen like my parents." Audrey spat. "I can still… go out! I can be like you are here. I can do what I do here… over there! In Auroria."

"What does Auroria have Guards for? Emergency services? We don't have those things here. Everyone helps everyone. In Auradon, everyone minds their own business." Mal pointed out.

Audrey grumbled in agreement. "And everyone hates what they can't understand." She agreed. Mal looked at her in surprise. She hadn't realized that… Audrey was starting to catch onto Auradon's discrimination system.
"I'm just angry." Audrey sighed. "I don't want to have to choose, but... if I'm not Queen, then what was I even born and raised to be in the first place? I can't just walk away from responsibility."

"You're a queen without the crown," Mal assured her. "We get to choose what we want to be. We forge our own paths and choose our own destiny. What do you want yours to be?"

Audrey kicked a rock down the street. "I guess... I don't know. I don't want to leave here..." She trailed off, biting her bottom lip. Mal didn't add on at all.

Three young men were standing at the corner of a building next to the small park, talking as Mal and Audrey started to walk past them. One was holding onto a small tree's branch as he laughed with his friends. He had brown hair with sideburns and pretty brown eyes. He was dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and tan pants with many pockets. As Audrey and Mal walked past, the former with her arms still crossed, his hand shot out and seized her upper arm. He pulled her into his embrace and went down with a knee, dipping her low to the ground.

Mal tensed and spun on her heel the moment Audrey disappeared from her side. She watched, alarmed, as the young man held an arm firmly around her. "Well, it's not every day I get a pretty young lady falling into my-" He started with a comfortable smirk. He was interrupted by a loud crack.

Everyone looked up at the branch of the tree he was holding onto as it cracked, and then snapped clean off the trunk of the tree with a sound like gunfire. Audrey shrieked as her head fell the last six inches to the ground and the young man's arm disappeared from under her as he tried to stop himself falling on top of her and crushing her. A large, leafy branch hit the ground next to her head as she shielded her eyes with her arms and yelled in alarm. When it ended, she was cautiously peeking past her wrists, laying on the ground with her hair in knots with pebbles stuck in it. The man who'd grabbed her in the first place was still clutching the branch and bracing himself on top of Audrey as if he expected a load of bricks to fall on top of his back. It had happened so quickly that Mal didn't even have time to react.

The young man untensed and sat up. He looked from the branch still clutched in his hand to Audrey on the ground beneath him. "Oh no!" He moaned. He dropped the branch and covered his eyes. "I've ruined everything!"

"What were you trying to do?" Mal asked with wide eyes as she began to pull Audrey away by the shoulders. She looked unharmed but scared out of her wits. The poor boy blushed and covered his face.

"I – well, I think you're really pretty. I've been trying to think of a cool way to introduce myself for days, but I'm not really good with people so I thought: Auradon girls like flirty guys! And I tried to dip you and make it pretty but the branch broke and I'll understand if you never want to see my face again." He explained, stumbling over his words and then burying his face in his legs. His friends patted his back awkwardly.


Audrey patted the young man's arm. "Oh. Well, that was really sweet of you. Could have been executed better, but still really sweet. What's your name?"

The boy slowly uncovered his face. "I'm, uh, Jarrett Westergaard. Go by my middle name. My dad is Hans? I'm like his second or third son. Something like that. You're not mad?"

Audrey chuckled. "No. I understand. It's nice to meet you, Jarrett. I'm Audrey."
"Oh, hi Audrey." Jarret fumbled with his hands and then held one out for her to shake. Audrey's cheeks turned a little pink as she shook his hand. Mal couldn't believe what she was witnessing. "I'm sorry for dropping you." He apologized.

"No problem." Audrey smiled. "You're really sweet, Jarrett. And for the record, Auradon girls like sweet guys." She squeezed his hand and stood up. "Want to keep going, Mal?" She asked.

Mal, Jarrett, and Jarrett's two buddies wore equal expressions of shock. Mal quickly stood up and waved to the three boys, and she and Audrey continued down the street. As they walked away, they heard one of Jarrett's friends ask: "Did you really just score an interest with her?"

Mal elbowed Audrey "What on the Isle just happened?" She whispered.

Audrey looked flustered, blown away, and touched, all at once. "I have no idea." She whispered. She balled up her fists, giggled, and squealed a little bit.

The castle was jumping at five a.m. Almost all the lights were on as people rushed back and forth. Mal had let her horns out as she gathered together everything that she would need for the trip north. Before, she'd taken herself and almost nothing else, but that was for a there-and-back trip. Now, she was leaving with the intent to finish this war on its head.

Stewart was leaving with her. His bags were stacked beside hers in the front foyer for Mal to shrink down and put in her pocket before she transformed into a dragon and took them to the north.

Mal stormed down the stairs and dropped her last small bag on top of the pile. She was wearing her Isle jacket, which was a bit small on her now, and a pair of black ripped jeans. Lumiere appeared from outside. "Would it be inappropriate, Queen Mal, to film your transformation?"

"Go ahead," Mal nodded in approval. She glanced around the room and spotted Ben hanging out in the shadows of the staircase. A tiny sandstorm was whirling around his fingertips. She took a few careful steps forward and he dropped his hand to look over at her. She saw the way his lip quivered, and knew he wasn't happy with his new powers.

It was interesting, hiding in the shadows with him. logically, she knew Lumiere had seen her walk over and knew that anyone walking in the door could see them, but it still felt like sacred ground. Somewhere special only they knew.

"What's it feel like?" She whispered, nodding at his hand.

Ben didn't respond for a few seconds. He focused on the ground. After a long few minutes, he sighed. "In our room, it's better, but when I'm anywhere else it feels like the castle is… glaring at me."

Mal chuckled and nodded. "I remember that feeling," She agreed. "Magical staining." She hesitated. There were other things she wanted to tell Ben, but she knew he had to get whatever it was off his chest first.

After about a minute, Ben broke and began to talk again. "It's just – I love magic! I do! Especially yours. When you do magic, when you're growing your wings or your horns or helping people on the Isle or trying to make my life easy, it's really, really sexy!" He growled. Mal felt her cheeks go red and her body became a bit warm. Ben took a few steps forward, tugged her chin up, and stared at her eyes. She let a bit of magic swirl into them so they'd light up for him and he let out a ragged breath. "I fall in love with you over and over whenever you do magic. I love the way you love it. The very first time I looked over at you and I thought: 'This girl is amazing' was that night you
filled my dad's office with dust and I loved it, Mal." Ben stared at his hands and shook them as if he were angry. "But this? This is chaos magic! This is disorder and ruin and... it's not like me the way your magic is like you. I want it to be hard to use these powers. I want to feel like I'm sweating bricks and being stabbed but it's easy. It's so easy to conjure storms and sands. I just... don't want to have this power of destruction."

Ben withdrew from her and then looked away, pain stretching across his face. Mal stayed still and twiddled her fingers. "I know there's nothing in the world I can say to make you feel better." She whispered.

Ben grunted and covered his face with his hands. Mal took his left hand and threaded her fingers through his. He watched her as their wedding rings clicked together, and then she squeezed his hand. Then she stepped up next to him and put her small, strong, lithe arms around him in a big hug. He leaned into her embrace, exhausted, as she rubbed his shoulders through her hold. "I love you. No matter what" She whispered. "And this will get better with time. You can do this. It will be okay."

"It will be," Ben agreed. He sighed, and his shoulders relaxed. Mal sat up.

"I have something I need to tell you now, though," She whispered, pressing her hands to her midsection.

Ben folded his arms across his stomach and cocked his head at her. "Yeah?" He whispered.

"When I was channeling my magic to you and draining myself," Mal started, "I looked down and noticed there was an area of my body completely devoid of magic. Just a small one, right here." She gestured to underneath where her belly button was.

Ben made a face. "What does that mean?" He asked.

"Well, in a normal magic person that wouldn't happen," Mal said seriously. "When they say 'magic is a part of you', they mean every part of you. It can get thin in some place, but it should never be devoid. But since I'm pregnant..."

Ben's eyes grew hard in panic. "Is everything okay?" He asked.

Mal nodded. "I'm absolutely fine," She assured him. "But the baby isn't magical." She crossed her arms and watched emotions flicker across Ben's face.

"Not... what?" He asked.

"The baby will be born human," Mal said firmly. "No magic."

"Oh," Ben said. "Okay, that's okay."

"Great." Mal nodded, though it really wasn't. She couldn't believe something that important had been confirmed so far before the baby's birth. She felt like everything was folding out before her, and she didn't want to know anything yet. She wanted it to still be so far away that nothing could possibly be determined.

Ben twiddled his thumbs. "Does this mean that, like, every kid we have from here on out will be magical?" He asked. "Since I'm sandy and everything?"

Mal snorted. "You're sandy. Okay, I like that. I'm going to call you sandy now."
"Please don't," Ben asked with a wince. "But, what do you think?"

"Yeah, probably." Mal nodded. "I guess this one will be the only person in the family without magic."

"Aside from Mom and Dad." Ben shrugged.

"And Aunt Sophia, Aunt Evie, Aunt Audrey, Uncle Jay, Uncle Carlos, and Uncle Stewart," Mal said in a very rushed voice. Ben laughed. "Who are we choosing as godparents?" Mal asked.

"I dunno." Ben shrugged. "Maybe Jay?"

Mal hesitated. "Did I ever mention to you that Jay-"

"Kissed you? Yeah. He actually told me about it, and that was one of the memories I lived through." Ben smiled.


"Jay and Audrey?" Ben asked.

"Yeah." Mal agreed.

"Okay." Ben nodded. Silence overtook them. Mal clasped her hands and stared down. Ben let out a tremendous sigh and covered his face again as he laid back down. "I'm sorry we fought the other day," He confessed. "I should have been more understanding. I can't imagine how stressful this has been for you."

Mal snorted a little, nodding, and her eyes filled with tears. She turned and met his eyes. "I thought I was going to lose you," She whispered. "You were going so fast and I was running out of magic... and I thought I was gone when you collapsed and then... I wasn't."

"I thought I was dead too," Ben whispered. "There was pain everywhere and I thought I was going to the Underworld to suffer one of your dad's infernal punishments for everything bad I'd ever done until those memories started playing." Mal exhaled with a nod. What they'd experienced had been more than an uncanny life flash. She suspected that whatever had happened, it had saved both of their lives and probably turned Ben into a magical.

Ben squeezed her hand and sighed. "You'll stay safe, right?" He asked. "You'll keep yourself safe and our countries safe and our little one safe?"

"I'll do my best," Mal affirmed. "Hopefully I can turn this around fast and it'll all be over soon."

"If it goes for too long, can you just come back? I don't want to you become a target. There's going to be months you're sick and then when you start growing more... I want to spend those months with you." Ben tried to decipher all the emotions running through her eyes, but it was a maze he wasn't used to seeing on her. "If you get too far along, will you please just come back to me?"

Part of Mal really wanted to say no, but she knew this was one of those times she had to draw a line. For peace in her marriage, if not for her and her family's safety. "I'll come back in March at the latest," She promised. "And if things get too hard before then, I'll come back and wait. You can hold me to that." She patted his cheek. "And anyway, it won't be for too long. And I'm going to add another barrier to Auradon as I leave." She reminded him. "It should stop Overland people from coming back and forth."
"I know." Ben sighed. She headed towards the piles of baggage near the door and then shrunk them all into a collection of doll-sized items and stowed them in her jacket pocket. Ben followed her to the door, watched her zip up her jacket, and then reached out to grab her hand as she started to move farther away.

Ben put a hand up to her cheek and exhaled. "Mal, please don't go," He begged. "Please just stay here with me. Wait until after summer to go up. Please?"

"Your kid will be fine." Mal rolled her eyes. She leaned up and gave him a quick kiss.

"I'm not just worried about the baby." Ben leaned down and forced her to hold his gaze. "I love you. More than anything. I want to be sure you won't overdo yourself because… I don't know if I can rescue you like you rescued me. I still need... time." He sighed. There were so many things he wanted to say. Things like: "I know you'll be a good mom. Our kid will love you. I'm sorry you're struggling so much with this. You are the most important thing to me. I know I already told you that I love you but you need to know I already really love our baby too. Please, please, please bring both of you back to me." Instead, he whispered: "Please, please be safe," and hoped that all the other things went through to her.

"I will be." Mal smiled. "You just stay here and get better." She fixed the folds of his bathrobe and gave him a last peck on the cheek. "Maybe I'll be back in time for the first snow." She headed towards the door. Ben stuffed his hands into his pockets and watched her leave. As soon as the door closed, he moved carefully to the window and peeked outside, taking care to hide in the shadows of the door. He did not go outside to watch her leave. He stuck in the shadows of the entry hall and watched the scene outside like it was a bad dream he was shutting out.

Stewart gave Sophia a kiss and everyone stood back as Mal gave out her last hugs and went to stand in the center of the driveway. Lumiere was filming, even though it was dark outside. Ben watched Mal go up in smoke, and the same large dragon that had carried him back to Auradon took her place. Stewart climbed on top of her neck, holding on to the bags they were taking with them, and waved. Mal snorted, and they took to the air quicker than Ben could blink. He watched as the frost on the ground was blown clear off the grass and heard a low roar before she was gone.

And that was it. He was officially home alone without his wife, which was better than being away with her here but still, not fun.

Ben pulled out his phone and searched the web for 'King and Queen coronation blessings'. The first option was a transcript of his and Mal's blessings from last year. Once again, he found himself searching the words for any hint of comfort. This time, he found it. In the center of Mal's blessing, he read: 'Your marriage and your strong relationship with your husband will one day be your greatest achievement.'

Maybe it was selfish of him, but he was glad that after everything Mal had done and would do, she would still prize him above all else. He was important. She loved him. Maybe he wasn't the hero of his tale, but so long as he got to be the love interest of hers, that was all well and good with him.

Chad Charming had been stationed at an outpost with his battalion for four days when Queen Mal had the audacity to show up again. He'd heard all about how she'd come out of nowhere, kidnapped the king, and turned her tail back to Auradon, leaving them without their leader.

"Chad!" Lonnie shouted, tossing him a water bottle with a bright smile. "Great news! Mal's here."

Chad blinked at Lonnie as the dots slowly connected. Mal... the purple-haired girl who had
ascended their throne in a matter of two months. Ben's girl. The girl who he'd been prosecuted for. "Why?" He asked.

"She's taking Ben's place here," Lonnie declared, setting her foot on a wooden crate filled with dried fish and tightening the laces on her boots. "She's up in the meeting room. You and I are being summoned up there now."

Chad's face twisted a little. He glanced around at all the supplies he'd been taking inventory of and then carefully set down his clipboard. "Okay," He mumbled, twisting his hands a little.

Lonnie led the way up, and Chad simply focused on her feet and made affirming noises whenever it occurred to him that she was talking to him. He clenched and unclenched his hands. War had made him a little different already. He'd been thinking a lot about the last time he'd seen his parents before heading up. His dad - gods - had shaken his hand. Not even a hug. There was a 'good luck' and and 'I love you', but it had been clear from the moment he'd noticed the way his dad wouldn't meet his eyes that he wouldn't be getting an 'I'm proud of you.'

Ella Charming's heart was broken, and King Charming was disappointed in his son.

Some twisted part of him had thought they'd be proud of him standing up to the queen. After all, they had worried about her. They had sent protests to Adam and to Ben and they had held long, spiteful conversations across the dinner table about how they would have to protect their people in case the neighbors decided to invade or in case Queen Maleficent began to destroy them all. But things were different now. Queen Ella knew Queen Mal and knew that she was just a young girl trying to do the right thing. King Charming had seen the way the girl handled politics and had accepted her. And Chad had assaulted the queen and put the Charming family on a blacklist across the kingdom. The very first royal to be prosecuted and charged for sexual assault.

When it had first been aired and when his parents first called Auradon Accelerated to ask why exactly there was footage of his hand coming off the Queen's rear end and why King Ben had forwarded charges and applied for a restraining order, it had been easy to lie. He'd heard the trembling fear in his mom's tone and it had been easy, just like it had been easy to trick girls into doing his homework at Auradon Prep because he couldn't understand it but he needed his parents to be proud of his marks. Just like how it had been easy to tell them that the reason he was staying after hours in Auradon Accelerated's library was because he was ahead of his classes and bored and he was working ahead of the class, not hunting down high-school topics he still didn't understand.

"I'm not head of the Swords and Shields team because Lonnie wants to be a general and I thought that it'd be better for her," Not that he was swamped with homework he couldn't complete or that he simply wasn't good enough for the position.

"I don't want to take this class because I feel so ahead of the other students." Not that he didn't know any of the words coming out of the professor's mouth and he knew he would fail.

"I tried to confront the Queen. I asked what was going to happen to her mom. She rolled her eyes and tried to turn away. I meant to grab her wrist but she moved too quickly." I grabbed her. It was on purpose. She just looked too good to be true and I got so angry...

It had worked so, so well. He kept his marks to himself and used the internet to copy essays and used money to pay tutors to re-explain things and Ben hadn't really overreacted about that incident with Mal, so his parents had assumed all was well. They still had their perfect son. He was smart. He was handsome. He was going to make them proud.

He'd heard his mother's heart break when the truth had dropped from Ben's lips. "Why don't you
Maybe he hated Queen Mal with all his heart. Maybe that hate extended a little to Ben too. Ben, who had been captain of the high school Swords and Shields team. Who had had perfect marks and understood everything and who had been sitting in on meetings with his dad since he was eight and who was kind and perfect. Ben, who never took advantage of anyone and worked with all the cards he was dealt. Never stealing, never cheating. Ben; the true poster boy for goodness. Who married young and became the most powerful person in the country and who opened up two new kingdoms. Married young to a girl who literally came from squalor yet was more beautiful than any princess who'd ever spent any time in front of a mirror. Mal had never even been properly educated yet she understood dozens of concepts Chad had never even heard of and everyone praised her leadership abilities and she was a perfect queen despite her villainous backstory and the fact she had nothing backing her up. Why did she have to be kind, beautiful, smart and courageous despite the fact she'd been raised in everything that was the opposite? How was it that he could sit through fifteen years of school and work every day and still be less than her?

So yeah, maybe he hated her. Maybe he hated her with all his heart and Ben with her because Ben was the sort of boy parents would actually be proud of. But god forbid he didn't regret that April mistake with the queen. "Who wouldn't want to slam you? Your body is bewitching. I'd go down on you hard too." He still remembered the confusion and hurt that had flashed across her face. The vulnerability.

It had been easy to lie with that kind of hate in his heart. And still, his parents had accepted it. After all, it was easier than the truth.

"I'm going north because I want to make things right. I'm going to fight for Auradon." I'm going north to get away from school. I'm just about to fail out of university and if I go, then they'll extend the grading period. I'm going north because all of the Villain Kids are smarter than me even though they've never even had school before and I hate them. I'm going north to prove I'm still a good person. I'm going north and I'm going to be a better fighter than Lonnie, Ben, or Mal. I'm going to be a war hero. Then grades won't matter, college clubs won't matter, and that big mistake I made last spring won't matter. I'm going north to prove I'm just as good and brave and strong as Ben. When I get back, I'm going to get a girl even better than Mal. This will change my life. I'm going north to make my parents proud.

"Hey, Chad!" Jack Frost called, flitting past him. He'd returned from Auradon a few days earlier with astonishing news; Mal had healed Ben. Healed him from an incurable disease that no one had ever survived before. "How has it been?"

"Slow," Chad shrugged. "But people are moving again now that they know Ben will be okay. Soon we'll try to take Syracuse again and get the Book of Peace."

"Excellent," Jack smiled. "You're the man, Chad!"

Someone tapped on his shoulder. It was the Sandman. He flashed a bunch of pictures above his head. A question mark, a crown, and the Auradon crest. "Ben's alive," Chad shrugged. "But that's all I've heard. And Jack is the one who told me, so you should ask him."

"Actually, let's just ask the queen herself," Jack chuckled nervously. "Her information should be more up-to-date. She left Auradon about six hours ago."

"Via dragon?" Lonnie asked curiously. Jack nodded.

Astrid came around the corner and brightened up when she saw Chad. "Hey, man, I got your
invasion proposal approved. How would you like to hit Syracuse next week?"

Chad smiled. This was nice. "Yeah!" He agreed. "Do you want me to lead, or-"

"Well, it was your idea," Astrid interrupted. "It only makes sense you should lead. How does General Chad sound? I bet we could even convince Ben to make it official when he gets back."

Chad's smile grew brighter. A general. Technically, he would only be a squadron leader for the Syracuse battle, but the idea was just... extraordinary.

Ben might even agree if he pulled it off. He'd always been the easy-going, forgiving type. Maybe if he gave a really sincere apology after they'd told him the story and asked, he'd agree. He pictured Ben, his childhood friend, teammate, and captain, signing the official papers that would make him a general and shaking his hand with the smile he used to use back before Mal's Auradon Accelerated event. Back before he'd married and back before he left school. The papers and the title wouldn't be much more than a story for his kids once Ben's coronation block was lifted and he was officially allowed to ascend the Cinderellasburg throne, but it would be something he could show his parents. Something they could tell their friends about.

Chad stepped into the meeting room behind Astrid and immediately felt all his visions die before his eyes. Mal was standing across the room, facing away from him, shaking Nicholas's hand as he greeted her with a booming voice. He couldn't tell what he was saying past the ringing in his ears, but could feel the sound vibrations through his boots on the floorboards.

She was wearing leather. Leather and black with spray paint on her jacket. A Maleficent appliqué was on her back with the words "Long Live Evil", staring st him. Chad took a stance behind a chair cautiously. She hadn't noticed him yet, which gave him two opportunities.

Opportunity one, to think. Here was a very powerful person who he had wronged. Chad wondered if a simple apology could possibly lay to rest what he'd started. Guilt wracked his insides. Perhaps she was the same type of person as Ben. Happy, go-lucky, forgive and forget?

The second opportunity presented - and one that he refused to take too much advantage of - was the fact she was, of course, facing away. Chad let his eyes rake over her frame before focusing on the small portion of her face he could see at the angle he was in. She was still as beautiful as ever. And she wasn't showing her condition yet, which made things even better.

"Are you sure you should be up here right now?" Toothiana asked, flitting around nervously. "It's, uh, not exactly the place you want to bring a baby."

"Good thing I don't have one yet," Mal snorted. "Ben and I talked. I'll be going back in March at the latest. If things get too much, I'll take a break. He's going to forward things from the Isle and the Moors while I'm up here. Everything will work out."

"What if you get hurt and lose the pregnancy?" Astrid asked, bumping Mal's shoulder lightly. Mal wrapped a little arm around herself with a frown.

"I'll be okay," she promised. "We're going to be careful."

"Careful in a war?" Chad asked, trying to keep the biting jealousy out of his tone.

Mal turned, staring over her shoulder with a furrowed brow as if she remembered his voice but couldn't place it to a person. She shifted out of her relaxed posture and took up a defensive stance. "What are you doing here?" She demanded. Not unkindly, but firmly, as if she expected he had somehow smuggled himself in.
"Forgive me, your majesty," Chad began in a cool, crisp tone. "I was invited up. Are you feeling well?" He had to act cordial. Just get through the meeting. It doesn't matter that every single time she's ever seen you before you fought with her. Just get through the meeting. Just get through the meeting.

Mal squinted at him. Her hands were slowly coming up in case she needed to defend herself. Everyone was exchanging glances at her panicked gaze and Chad's skin was standing on edge. "I am," she began slowly. "And you?"

"Never better," Chad nodded, pulling out his chair. That response was actually honest. War was easy. War was fulfilling. Especially these last few days with Ben gone - He and Lonnie had been given more responsibilities. And while Lonnie preferred to spend minimal time planning and more time bonding with her soldiers, Chad had been hanging out with Jack and Hiccup and everyone in the higher-ups. They were trusting him more. Never mind that Ben had had his reservations about giving Chad too many responsibilities.

"How is Ben?" Jack asked, hovering over his chair as everyone else slowly took a seat. Queen Mal was given a gesture to King Ben's former seat, about four chairs away from Chad, and so she took her seat with none too few shifty glances towards Chad.

"He's doing well," Mal nodded. "Worried, of course. But all is well. The sand poisoning is gone. Now, all that's left to do is track down Helena."

"This is Troy?" Nicholas asked, and the hairs on the back of Chad's neck stood on edge.

Mal nodded. "Helena Apate Troy. Daughter of Eris and Pitch Black. I want to take her out and put her on my Isle of the Lost."

"Pitch?" Bunnymund gaped. "And Eris?"

"I've been thinking that there must be some crossover between our lands, because Apate is a mythological goddess from the Auradon Land of Olympus," Mal explained, ignoring everyone else's gains stares. A child of Nyx. She doesn't really exist to us, but she personified deceit, fraud and deception. She desired power and was a master of trickery." She spread her hands around the table. "The fact that there's that much correlation between a name and the fact we're able to communicate points to the idea that our continents couldn't have diverged that long ago."

"Yeah, that's amazing," Hiccup agreed, eyes sparkling. "All of our heroes are different too."

"Actually, they're not," Jack jumped in. Mal flicked her gaze over to Jack and drummed her fingers on the table. Chad ripped his gaze off of her and turned to see Jack fidget. "We have a Snow White and a Cinderella, but they're not heroes. They're just distant tales. Both of them actually live in what was Fiona and Shrek's land. Well, they might not even be alive anymore. The Swamp Lands and Far Far Away was pillaged and that land is overrun right now."

Mal's eyebrows shot up. "Interesting," she mumbled, and then nodded her approval. She pushed her hair back - it was short now, Chad noticed. Ben must be having the time of his life running his hand through those creamy locks. "I want to go after her," Mal announced. "Have there been any recent attacks that you know of?"

"Nah, lass," Bunnymund shook his head. "Everything quit once you showed up. All the fighting has paused continent-wide. We just barely got your soldiers to agree to keep fighting once they got their update on the king. We got Farquaad, but that's all. Pitch, Eris, and Helena have all gone silent, though we do know where Eris is."
"Where?" Mal demanded, sitting up straighter.

Astrid presented Chad with a smile and a little flourish. "General Chad has an invasion he's planned to get her next week."

Mal's face went ashen as she stared at Chad. "General Chad?" She repeated in a quiet, shocked tone. "Ben made you a General?"

Hiccup and Jack exchanged a look. Nicholas shifted his gaze between Mal and Chad. Lonnie leaned forward. "No," She shook her head. "Chad just came up with the idea to invade Syracuse, where Eris is hiding, using the old cell system. We've been joking and calling him a General, but we are going to ask Ben what he thinks when he's... recovered."

Chad ducked his head down a little and exhaled slowly. At least with Ben, he knew he would have had a chance. Ben was always willing to put aside personal reservations for the greater good or for political reasoning. But he didn't know Mal. He looked over at her, gauging her expression as her mouth dropped open and her face turned four different shades all in a row that would have looked hideous on anyone else. Then she glanced around the table, narrowed her eyes, and shook her head. "My husband will never make you a general," She declared.

Everyone looked shocked at the venom in her tone. Chad saw his daydreams going up in smoke before his eyes. "Even if I prove myself to be a hero?" He protested. "Even if I do everything that's asked and more? Ben believes in second chances!"

"A hero?" Mal snorted and then began to laugh. She laughed at him, and he felt like something was putting intense pressure on his heart. "Chad, you're not a hero; you're our villain. You don't even deserve to be King. Do you really think Ben will let you have a title that means he has to have quarterly meetings with you for as long as you're in service? That he'll give you something that gives you the right to come to the palace unannounced and to look through a portion of his records whenever you like it? To request private audiences with me?" Mal shook her head, and as much as Chad hated her and hated everything about her, he could see her logic. General wasn't just a fancy title. It was a job. It was something that required lots of communication with the King. It was something that required more time than he would be able to give in Auradon. And it gave him lots of privileges - privileges that would make it all too easy for him to give into temptation around the queen again. After what he'd done, he wouldn't trust himself either

"Chad, it doesn't matter how many accomplishments you have, Ben and I aren't going to open ourselves up to more attacks," Mal shook her head. "I'm sorry, but you've got to accept that." She turned and examined everyone else around the table as Chad slumped into his chair, defeated. "If Eris is at Syracuse, then maybe Helena is with her. Helena hasn't had much training at the battlefront. She's been kept in the shadows for too long. I don't want to give her the opportunity to fight at a forefront now that she knows she's been revealed. I'm going to journey down and see if I can take the place by force to find her."

"That's my battle!" Chad protested, spreading his hands on the table. "We already have plans drawn up. They were just barely approved!"

"We do have ideas," Astrid nodded, cautious to say anything. She looked between the Queen and him, her subordinate, in confusion. "What do you have in mind, Mal?"

"I brought people from the moorlands," Mal explained. "Can I have a map of what's going on?" She reached past Jack and Bunny passed her a roll of paper. She spread it out and drew her finger along the coastlines. "Ben mentioned that Pitch has more control of the west while Eris holds the East, right?"
"Yeah," Chad snapped. "Syracuse is that black dot by your thumb. There are prisoner cells that extend beneath the docks. We're going to head up the shafts and then invade from the courtroom."

"Let's move all of Auradon's troops to the West," Mal decided. "Fear is easier to combat than chaos. My Moorland creatures are familiar with magic and they'll be better equipped to deal with the chaos magic. I'm going to go straight up to Syracuse and do the same thing I did with Duloc. Take it by storm."

"No," Chad protested. "We already have plans. That is my battle!"

"This is my war, Chad," Mal cut him off. "You have to listen to Ben and I, remember?"

"I suppose you think you're running this whole thing, then?" Chad demanded and then turned to look at all his comrades. "Right? Guys?"

Nicholas shrugged, looking regretful. "I think that Mal's way would be more effective and result in less casualties." He decided.

"Chad, I know you wanted that battle, but it'll be better this way. They will be other things in the East and Auradon will be able to capture land quicker without their focuses divided," Lonnie put a hand on his arm.

Chad glared at the queen. "You," he spat. "Are a witch."

"Chad?" Astrid gaped at him, glancing at Hiccup and everyone else as their brows furrowed in confusion.

"This isn't my fault," Mal glared at Chad. "I'm doing what's best for my country. You're doing what's best for you."

"Is there some bad history between you two?" Jack asked, sitting up. Chad clamped his teeth down on his tongue and tasted blood. His eyes were burning.

"Yeah," Mal agreed, tracing the tip of her finger down the map without looking at anyone else. "Chad was prosecuted for sexually assaulting me last April. His restraining order expired a month ago. Ben suspended his ability to inherit his throne because of it. That's why he's here in the first place."

"What?" Nicholas gasped in shock as red seared its way into his cheeks. "Chad wouldn't."

Mal looked up, focused briefly on Chad, and then glanced back down. "Ben said the same thing," she mumbled in an offhand tone. "But it's kind of hard to argue against nation-wide live video footage of his hand coming off my rear end."

Astrid clapped a hand over her mouth and Chad could feel all the trust he'd built up with everyone crashing down. Mal spread her hand out on the map and exhaled. "I'll work with you," she began, directing this at Chad. "But don't expect me to let my guard down or be overly kind. Ben is willing to let things rest, but I'm not. And heaven forbid you get the opportunity to attack me again."

Chad sat there, staring, fuming, fist clenching and unclenching. Then he shoved his chair out and got to his feet. No one protested. They were all still in shock. He went to the door and left, slamming it into the frame behind him.

God, he hated her. He hated her and how everything was so easy, so effortless for her. How everyone agreed with her. She'd probably done bad things before. She might have even murdered
someone before - on the Isle before she knew Ben. But she was smart and kind and good and everything Chad had never been able to be. And Queen.

Nothing he did would ever matter because he was never going to be able to redeem himself in her eyes.

Audrey was pulling up on her boots, preparing to head to the Isle of the Lost. The sailors were about to raise the gangplank when someone shouted and rushed forward. Audrey looked up and down the wharf to see what the commotion was. It was Queen Ella, dressed in fishnet stockings, high-heeled booties, a long-sleeved blue knit shirt, and a swishy blue skirt. She was sprinting down the harbor towards the ship.

The sailors waited as she rushed towards the ship and nearly broke her ankle trying to slow down to climb up the gangplank. Ella hurried aboard, thanking the sailors who were muttering about how all the royals suddenly wanted to go over and made her way to Audrey.

"Good morning Queen Ella," Audrey said feebly. "What brings you here today?"

Queen Ella was trying desperately to catch her breath. "I need to find my step-sister." She gasped. "Can you help me?"

Audrey blinked several times. "Um, Anastasia, yes. Drizella hasn't been let inside yet."

"That's fine." Ella waved her hand. "Anastasia is the one I need."

Audrey wasn't quite sure what to make of this development, so she smiled awkwardly and began lacing up her boots. She'd dressed a little less grunge and a little more prep today, just in case she saw Jarrett again.

Hey, she was allowed to like who she liked, wasn't she?

Chapter End Notes

Haha, you thought I couldn’t make you feel bad for Chad, huh?
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Ben is struggling with his sand magic. Mal fights a battle up North and is shamed by Jack for not being sensitive enough to her pregnancy. Stewart's eye is destroyed. Ben visits the Isle of the Lost and Hades learns that Mal is pregnant.

It took Ben a few days to actually get the courage to get up and go into his office. In that time, he heard dozens of rumors and stories and read tons of articles, all criticizing Mal's decision to pass her new laws and calling out the palace for not acting properly. It would have put Ben on-edge, except for they were all old. Auradon interweb had seemingly raged about the occurrence for two days and then decided all was well. The most recent article he could find with a mention of Mal's laws was just a simple one talking about how Charmington had managed to work out a deal with Corona in the wake of Queen Rapunzel's heroism in the palace.

Over a week after he'd first come home, he finally worked up the courage to head upstairs, unlock his door, and take a look around. In his 'immediate' drawer was a stack of papers. Some of them had been partially completed in Mal's spiderlike scrawl, and others had come in during the past week. It was fascinating how little there was. He pulled out his filing cabinet to glance at everything recent. His dad hadn't spoken to him about anything pertaining to the kingdom yet, but perhaps he had done a few things? Yet, when he looked, there was nothing. Nothing had been completed since October thirty-first - the day Mal had headed North. There simply wasn't much coming in anymore.

What had she written?

Ben turned on his computer. It actually took a little while to warm up since it hadn't been used in about a month. He saw the marks Mal had left behind - moving the mouse up to sit on top of the desk instead of leaving it in the rolling compartment and scooting the screen back because she wasn't using the touchscreen feature and it was too close. Everything looked neat. Not necessarily the way he'd left it, but neat. None of the books he regularly consulted had been used because she preferred digitized records and all of the pertinent folders he usually arranged on his desk had been put aside so she would have more workspace.

He clicked through to the recent files and found Mal's changes under 'Queen Documents'. There wasn't exactly a lot under the folder - her residence permit, her coronation blessings, their marriage certificate and a couple other identifying documents before he found them all in a little list. He pulled them all up, one by one, and examined them. They were all short, concise, and well-thought-out despite the frame of mind she'd been in when she'd written them. They were all very good, but Ben's heart sank a little as he realized what this meant.

Kingdoms would have to team up to conduct quarterly examinations of the palace, inter-kingdom policies were to be determined without the aid of the high palace, and the High Kingdom would no longer be running inter-kingdom trade. Mal had inadvertently begun to fulfill a prophecy. Auradon unification.

It made him feel so rotten - why hadn't he thought of this? He could have saved himself so much work over the last few months and Mal wouldn't have suffered so much while he was gone. And
Mal had fulfilled nearly every single thing that had been told to her during her coronation blessings - what had he done? He was supposed to be minimizing suffering and leading the kingdom into an era of peace. There was supposed to be growth and no suffering. His home was supposed to be a place of refuge. Yet here he was, suffering and useless and too shaken to even function throughout an entire day without locking himself away in his room for some peace and quiet. Corrupted and ruined and defiled by this dark magic.

Ben yanked out a packet of papers that had been sent to Mal from the north. She knew his filing system remarkably well, so he found what he was searching for almost immediately. The Auradon Death Count, as of last week, was two-thousand-and-four-hundred. Two thousand people were dead because of him, with almost double that number missing or wounded. He'd started the bloodiest event in Auradon History so far. This many people hadn't died in such a short amount of time since the villains were raging across the land in the War of Good and Evil that had built the Isle and spawned the Unspeakable Punishments.

That was two-thousand people with a future; with families. Two thousand people who he could have kept safe. Ben's hands shook as he set the file down with a deep breath. He was a failure of a king. He'd been so sure that this was the right thing, but if only he'd stayed out instead. They could have brought Jack Frost and the other heroes to Auradon instead and blocked out the barrier to their northern foes. These people would all still be alive. He would still be human.

Ben felt the magic churning under his skin, hated and disgusting, and wished he could just peel back the layers so he could let it all out; let it drip down with the gravity that was pulling on his soul and hit the ground. Let all this wretched, angry, death magic out of him and let it pour into the carpet in the shade of blood.

But he couldn't. He couldn't because it had been burned into his system - into every part of him. It was a parasite he couldn't get rid of. Something that had free travel around his body. That had invaded and overtaken and now he was stuck as the unwitting host of something he had never wanted.

He had made a horrible mistake. He'd overestimated himself, Mal, and their kingdom. There was blood on his hands - if he could kill two-thousand people with one decision in one month, he wondered how much damage he would do with this black sand scratching at his muscles and whining through his veins. He'd even almost managed to kill Mal with work overload while he was gone. Mal, who had been so desperate to get away that she'd fled Auradon, the Moorlands, and the Isle completely. He'd almost killed her and their baby before she had somehow managed to save his miserable existence.

It would have been so much easier if he'd died.

The thought sent physical plain through him, but he believed it with all his heart. Mal was strong enough to get along without him. Sure, she might have burnt the Overlands to the ground when she'd found out, but then the war would be over and she'd be a fine queen and a fine mother and he wouldn't have to worry about her fighting away from him and he wouldn't have to deal with this death magic spinning around in his lungs and making it hard to breathe and see and speak. Figuratively, of course, which was almost the worst part. He wished that the magic itself felt worse than it did so he could feel justified for this fiery hate in his stomach for it. As it was, he could scratch someone with this death power and they would die the same dismal fate he should have suffered and this power was just under his skin. He was a lousy excuse for a king (Two-thousand-and-four-hundred dead!) and a pitiful fraud of a husband (How could he not have noticed that something was wrong?) and he should have died (Should die) before he ever had the chance to hurt his kid like he'd hurt everyone else. Why was Auradon still looking to the palace for answers? (Mal) How
could his parents even look at him? (He's their son and they love him.) Why would Mal still want him like this?

Whatever voice of reason had been living in his head since this whole escapade had started was going silent. He felt like he was drowning - like black sand was piling in his lungs and filling his head so that the lights were flashing and boring down into his skull.

*makeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstop.*

*Idon'twantthisIdon'twantthisIdon'twantthisIdon'twantthis.*

*takeitawaytakeitawaytakeitawaytakeitaway.*

*I want to die. I want to die.*

Ben started furiously closing tabs on his screen, wanting nothing more than to squeeze his eyes shut and go lock himself in the bathroom for the rest of the day. He wanted to sit in the shower with the water scorching his skin and making it *red, red, red* until he couldn't feel anything except the fact his brain was trying to tell him he was in pain. Let the mirror cloud over so he couldn't see himself anymore. He wanted to try and scrub all of the itch out of his hair and wash all of his sand down the drain. Either waste all of the pale makeup people sometimes sent Mal to cover all the scars on his chest or take a pair of scissors and try to cut them off of his body. He wanted to force himself to throw up again and again to get all of this *stupid* sand out of him. Bury himself into his old childhood bedroom and pretend he'd never become king, never ruined Mal's life, never started a war, never let his parents down, and never picked up the most dangerous type of magic he'd ever encountered like it was some sort of enhancing tattoo. Or at the very least, he wanted Mal back to make him forget it all.

Would Hades bring him back if he died? If Mal begged him? She'd be furious if he arranged his own accident after she'd gone to all that trouble and almost died herself to bring him back. But goodness, wouldn't it just be easier for her?

His cell phone was heavy in his pocket. It was almost as if his brain had disconnected from his fingers and he pulled it out and thumbed through the contacts until he was staring at Mal's old friend with a million forbidden ideas jumping through hoops in his skull. Jay had loved Mal. Jay had wanted to be her partner. Maybe if he was gone, Jay would marry her. Become King of the Isle. So now his fingers were typing out this twisted message even though he shouldn't be. (He should be stopping now and turning off his phone and taking deep breaths because this was going to be okay and he just needed a little more-)

B: "If I happened to die, would you consider marrying Mal?"

Mal was a better ruler than he was anyhow. Not a single person had died in her Isle rush. Had he not given them enough? Most of them had undergone basic defense tactics in schools and then there were teams and they had given them a little training up north, but it was an overall bad situation that he had started. Mal could be queen all by herself and then he could be *gone, gone,* gone. After all, she was the one who had held everything together and inspired everyone and then passed those laws-

"It was an act of foresight," someone said from the doorway. It was Sophia, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed and a contemplating look on her face. "Everyone thinks it was just exhaustion and selfishness. Belle even told her that she shouldn't be doing such things while her emotions were so crazy, but if there's one thing Mal can do, it's unite people."
How long had she been standing there? Had he been speaking out loud? "She can," Ben mumbled. "She's very good at making people become their own leaders."

Sophia stepped inside, sat down hard on a chair, and crossed one of her boots over her knee. "How have you been, Ben?" She asked in a dreamy tone. "Good to be home?"

Ben furrowed his brow at her. "You saw me this morning," he remarked slowly. Of course, it had been for a few minutes to bring him breakfast and see that he'd gotten up. ("Yes, I'm feeling better. No, you don't need to worry about me. I'm not sore anymore. The magic is still there. I think I might go outside for a little bit today. No, I don't want to see my parents. Thank you, Sophia.")

Sophia arched an eyebrow and, for some reason, Ben's skin grew icy. There was something else in the room - a third presence. Someone magic. Someone not him.

Sophia's eyes lit up with a golden glow and Ben jumped up, gasping, from his seat. "Oh!" He exclaimed, heart thudding against his chest. "You-you're Agathe!"

Sophia's appearance melted away. No longer was the black-haired servant girl with her embroidered dress standing before him, but a tall and nonchalant woman from the moorlands. "I'm sorry to disturb you," she commented softly. "I thought I might come and see the place again. I haven't been by since the curse was broken. You've replaced the flooring in the entry hall since then."

Ben almost buckled down into nervous laughter. "I, uh, could give you a tour if you wish?" He ran his hands through his hair nervously.

Agathe shook her head. "Oh, no," she shook her head. "But it occurs to me I haven't spoken to you since you were very young. Aside from our short exchange in the moors. It's very interesting to remember you so young."

"I don't actually recall," Ben mumbled slowly. "How old was I?"

"Only a lad," Agathe assured him. "Maybe four. Maybe three. You were very fascinated by my magic. And you thought the pictures I could show you were very pretty. I remember you were babbling about the purple princess when your mom came to lead you away."

"Purple princess?" Ben repeated softly. He twisted his hands for a moment and then sat down. Agathe smiled softly like she was looking at a lovely scene that he just couldn't see.

"I showed you magic," she recalled. "You thought it was incredible when the 'big dog' turned into your dad. And you were astonished to see a fairy put Audrey's mom to sleep with a pointed stick. I think your mom might have gotten into some trouble with you talking to Aurora about it." She brushed her legs off with a smile. "Mal was less impressed when I showed her pictures. Of course, I had to do hers rather quickly, or she'd have figured out enough to try and avoid things. You have a smart one."

"You traveled to the Isle?" Ben asked, surprised. "When?"

"Not to the Isle," Agathe corrected. "At your reception. She told you that she'd met me, remember? When this girl-" She briefly took on Sophia's appearance again, "-took her away. I had to act quickly - you were all shielding her so much. But I remember how quickly her mind moved. Buildings on the Isle of the Lost - things she'd already started imagining. The Jolly Roger on the docks... even her sister."

Ben got back out of his seat and circled his desk. He stood a few feet from Agathe for a few
seconds and then slowly got on the ground in front of her, reaching for one of her hands. She wore black, moss-like gloves. "You've been telling her things," he whispered. "Giving her visions. And I don't expect you to grant me anything because I know she needed - deserved - the extra preparation, but can you tell me about her? Will she be okay? Will we make it through this?"

"'We' is a strong word, Ben," Agathe chuckled. "You will be just fine. All hard things will pass. Your blessing tells you so."

"And Mal?" Ben prompted, squeezing her fingers a little in his anxiety.

Agathe shook her head. "Mal has already received that prophecy," she murmured. "Unless something changes, her time is almost past. She knows. She thinks she can change it, but she knows."

"Will she?" Ben gasped. A feeling like he was being burned from the inside out again came.

Agathe raised an eyebrow at him. "Time isn't as subjective as you seem to think it is, Ben. Most things are set in the stars and the more you try to pretend they're not, the brighter they become. Like your mother - she was told her family would walk alongside villains. She put it out of her head - she was busy welcoming you into the family - but that was her warning. And your father was told that he would become the beast of his family again, and we all saw the truth of that a few weeks ago. He spent all your life trying to avoid it, but to no avail."

"Are you coming back to warn us or to mock us?" Ben asked bitterly.

Agathe's eyes softened. "Do you think I set the future?" She whispered, running a gloved hand down his cheek before pulling the hand he held out of his grasp. She tugged the gloves from her fingertips. "You forget; I've been here many years and many years will I remain. I came to your great-grandfather with a prophecy that magic would one day enter into his bloodline. I warned your grandfather that allowing his son to grow up in such a hideous, selfish manner would bring a horrible curse upon the castle, and when fate called on me to be the bearer of that curse, I saw how your father would one day ascend his throne and give it to the greatest king of any dispensation - you. Your family fears me and thinks I bring bad luck to you all, but I have seen what you will do and say. I knew, long before your father was even born, that there would be a young fairy trapped here with a prince who was terrified to disappoint his parents. And I know, next generation, your princess will secede her right to your throne."

A princess. His princess. A princess of Auradon. His daughter. Would Mal live long enough to have their baby? Was that how he would lose her?

"But Mal?" Ben asked, trying to not prod too much while desperate to know more. "Our family? She's so young - she has to have the chance for a life outside of war and chaos, right?"

Agathe set her bare hand on his cheek and a vision clouded Ben's eyes. A vision of a fleet of ships, speeding across the water. He could see himself at the head of one, pointing the direction onwards with his face twisted in fear. It must be a sea battle. He would lose Mal in a sea battle. Could Mal swim? He glimpsed her face for a split second - her hand on his cheek, her green eyes flashing like some sort of siren, a long gash was torn into the side of her face - and then realized Agathe had taken her hand away and was replacing her gloves.

"I want to stop it," Ben whispered hoarsely. "Please, please, Agathe. I can't live without her. I don't want to even try. I - I wish... please, can it be me instead?"

"How selfish," Agathe responded immediately in a flat tone. Ben flinched back from her cold
words and continued boring his eyes into hers. Pleading for there to be some way.

"Be glad, Ben," Agathe told him, standing up and sidestepping his frame on the floor. "You will be Auradon's greatest king, and you and Mal will be remembered for generations." She picked up his phone and made to hand it to him before sparks flew and she dropped it. "My apologies," she muttered, glaring at the screen - which seemed perfectly fine - and shaking her hand. "I have heat magic, and we don't react kindly to electronical devices." She nudged it with her foot towards him and then turned to the door. Ben watched her walk out without another word and wished he could call her back. Would it be worth begging her to change things? She didn't decide fate...

Ben's phone buzzed against the floor. He blinked broken-heartedly at it and realized that Jay had sent him a return message.

"No, bro. I'm not interested in trying to be you for her or for your kid. Also, your job sucks. So take care of yourself and take care of our girl, okay? Cause I can still beat you up if you hurt her."

Ben leaned against the chair Agathe had sat in and, he swore, he almost started crying then and there. The way he saw it, this war would likely go on into the next year. Mal would come back and probably - he assumed - give birth to their baby girl before she returned to the Overlands and then died in some sort of sea accident. He'd be left alone to finish the war and raise that child, only for her to secede his throne. What would he do then? Remarry? Step down and let the kingdoms elect a new High Kingdom? How would he live without Mal? How could he possibly talk to her about this?

Of course, if something changed, then there was still a chance. Maybe if he could somehow keep Mal away from all sea battles and ask her to stay behind after their daughter was born - explain about the prophecy and figure something out... they just needed a change. One small change... one small chance.

That was all he really needed.

Mal had never really used maps before coming north. Now, she needed them because she had no idea where anything was. She traced the jagged outlines of the southern Islands, labeled 'Nightmare Islands'. To the north of the Nightmare Islands and still separate from the rest of the continent was the island of Berk. A north pole, deserts, mountains and spacious lakes also dotted the continent. Then places called Suburbia, Modesto, New York, Madagascar, Mount Sinai, and Panda Village. She knew Syracuse, where Ben had been captured, and then Duloc, which she'd momentarily recaptured, but her knowledge was more limited than it was of Auradon.

Tiny notes were scribbled onto the margins of the maps. In some, she could see Ben's elegant, kinglike handwriting making notes of where future battles could occur and where the enemy's front lines were the weakest.

"Is it weird being so far from home right now?" Astrid asked, leaning into a chair beside her and playing with the end of her braid. Mal glanced over at the girl. She liked Astrid. Astrid dressed regularly in leather and armor and kept knives sheathed to her belt. She was handy with a sword, axe, anything really, and was very snarky and sarcastic, though Mal could do without the probing questions into her life in Auradon.

"No," She responded. "When I first went to Auradon it was a bit of a culture shock from the Isle, but I'm not really focusing on the differences here." She traced a borderline to a place labeled 'Troll Tree', which had no black on it, and brushed against a sticky note reading: "NTS, introduce Mal and Poppy."
"Well, I mean right now," Astrid huffed, sitting up a little straighter. "Don't you want to go back and, y'know, prepare to be a mom?"

"No," Mal bit out as patiently as she could. "I'm actually quite happy here. It's nice to have a break from Auradon."

"Well, yeah, it's nice to travel," Astrid agreed with a sigh. "But it's so dangerous up here! If Hiccup and I were having a baby, I'd go back home to Berk. Or, well, I'd probably ask if I could chill in Auradon now that there's a little bit more travel. He and I are holding off both our wedding and everything after until this war is done."

"Well, good for you," Mal grit her teeth. "Are you trying to insinuate that I'm not doing things right because I do want to be up here?"

"Oh, no!" Astrid shook her head. "No, I was just saying that, well, I would want the time to get ready and the safety and everything. And I'm sure Hiccup would feel the same. I'm honestly really surprised Ben agreed to let you come up."

Mal's shaking finger stilled on the page. "What do you mean 'let' me come up? I chose to come, he supported me."

"Well, Hiccup would have asked me to stay behind if I was pregnant," Astrid expanded, gesturing broadly with her hands.

"And you would have listened?" Mal asked flatly.

"Of course!" Astrid nodded. "There's a saying about not biting off more than you can chew? Just... war and kids don't usually mix is all I'm saying. I'm surprised you even want to be here. And when you start getting sick in a month or so, it'll be even worse."

Mal sighed and decided to not say anymore as she examined the jagged outlines of the continent. It was fine to be different - different from Belle, Ben, Astrid, Audrey, her mom, everyone. Why wasn't her brain working like everyone else's?

Frost spread into the room, announcing an incoming snow sprite moments before his appearance. "The city of Shanghai is in trouble," Jack Frost announced, breezing into the room and settling onto his staff. "Yi and her squadron are trapped inside and Fearlings are closing in. They're surrounded and falling fast. Is there any chance we can get a group of Auradon soldiers up in less than a half-hour?"

"Yeah," Mal agreed, pushing up and glancing to find Shanghai on the map. It was near the north pole. "Lonnie's squad is outside right now. If you have a way to get us there, we can go."

"We have new snowglobes!" North announced cheerfully, pulling two large snowglobes out of his pocket. "Have you used one yet? Ben quite liked them."

Mal took the glass balls with a pensive expression. They were made of snow magic, but obviously, some metal and glass had gone into them too. "Let me guess, say a place, shake it, and throw it?"

"You have one shot," North nodded with a smile.

"Woah, Woah, Woah," Astrid held out a hand in front of Mal before she could take another step forward. "I know you've already burnt one place to the ground, but maybe it's time to take a breather and let us do the hard work. You've got to not do so much."
"Astrid," Mal huffed, pushing her hand aside. "I appreciate the concern, really, but I've got this and you need me anyways." She started to head to the doors, but Jack also caught her shoulder.

"Mal," he coughed and then corrected himself. "Uh, Queen Mal, Astrid is right. You can only demolish so many places before you wear yourself out. We need you for the bigger battles. And besides, with you in your condition, I think it's time for adventure to take a backburner, don't you?"

"Guys!" North exclaimed with a laugh. "She can do it! These Auradon folks are persistent! They know how to keep safe! She will be just fine."

"Yes!" Mal agreed with a little bit too hard of a snap. "I will be just fine. You can tag along if you want, but don't say another word to me about stopping or slowing down." She marched past Jack, narrowly avoiding knocking him off his staff and disappeared into the corridor. Adventure take a backburner... go back home... Did they think she was here for some sick glory?

They didn't just spend a month being worked to death. They didn't have their husband fighting to keep them home and calling them out for not trying hard enough.

Mal didn't check to see if anyone had followed her - she went straight downstairs and out of their headquarters to see Lonnie with her squad out front. "Lonnie!" She called as she got close. "We need you guys to head out. We're going to a place named Shanghai. It's a rescue mission."

"Need a guard?" Someone called from behind her. Mal turned and spotted Stewart striding across the courtyard with a smile. Behind him, she saw a head of blonde hair slink into the shadows.

"Sure," Mal smiled. She turned back to Lonnie. "I'm going to put us on the outskirts. It sounds like they're being surrounded, so if we re-surround them, then."

"We'll have forces in the middle and on the outskirts," Lonnie smiled. "Okay, everyone! Rows of five please!"

Mal didn't stop to watch everyone move. She shrunk one of the snowglobes and set it in her pocket before carefully shaking the other one. "Shanghai, south side," She whispered, and then tossed it to the ground at her feet. Immediately, she slipped and then was whirling through a bright white vortex before she stumbled on her feet and walked forward a little. Behind her was a white portal. Out of the portal came, first Stewart and Lonnie, and then dozens of rows of soldiers, armed with swords, guns, and even a few grenades strapped onto their belts.

Far in front of them, a few miles away, there was a large city stretching towards the sky. The sounds of screaming and fighting could be heard echoing miles away. Mal could see people steadily marching into the city. "We need to hurry," she announced, taking a step forward.

"Careful with the ground," Lonnie advised. "The ground is mined. The others tend to know where to step, but our side has lost a few people because we took too many chances."

Mal got to her knees and planted her feet on the ground. In the moorlands, she could seek out the magic of the entire area and tell when things were sick, damaged, or even poisoned. Now, underneath the ground, she could feel danger. She pointed to the northwest. "There's a path," she announced. "Follow me."

The portal closed as the last soldiers came through and Mal saw Jack Frost flitted around nervously in the back. She gestured everyone forward and began to march. Lonnie directed everyone to stay in their lines of five as they marched. As they neared the city, Mal used her magic to probe for mines until the pressure activated ones abruptly ended. "They stop here," She announced. Jack
Frost flew up and landed beside her, Lonnie, and Stewart. They were within running distance of the city, but it was so dark that no call had been given up yet. The vast majority of the opposing forces were in the city. She hummed and tapped her foot. "It might be too hard to surround them if the city is that big." It stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction. "And there are so many roads... people would be able to slip away."

"What if I take the far north?" Jack asked, pointing to the opposite side of the city. "I can put up some pretty nasty ice walls. And we can use these" He pulled out two snowglobes, "-to send half of the army to the west and half to the east. Spread out enough and it'll work. Mal, if you use your dragon form, can you hold the south?"

"Actually," Mal hummed, glancing towards the city. "I can set the perimeter on fire. Just enough so there's a flat battlefield surrounding the city and then no one can escape. And if I fly over as a dragon, I can start sending people to the outskirts, right into your hands."

"That's a lot of magic," Jack frowned, eyeing her cautiously. "If you use too much, you could get denaturation. It's when your magic turns on your body and there's no cure for that."

"We call it poisoning," Mal nodded. "That's what Ben had."She sighed and examined the scene. "I think I can do it. As queen of the Moorlands, I have a lot of extra strength. And if I just do a thin line, it should be just fine."

Jack still looked worried, but Mal turned to nod at her soldiers. "Spread out as much as you can," She commanded. "And by the way, we're fighting fearlings. They can hypnotize and mimic voices, but if you can stay focused you won't be affected." People turned around to pass on the message. Mal put her hand on Jack's. "Put half of them on the North and we'll let the other half spread out here. that way, we save snowballs. I'll be back."

She stepped forward and closed her eyes. It took a moment, but she felt the magic welling up within her, spreading, and then her vision slanted and she grew as tall as some of the buildings in the city. She took to the sky, made a small circle, and heard some fighting stop in the city as Jack opened a new portal up where she'd left. Mal let a fire burn in her throat and then slowly breathed out a line of green dragon flame surrounding the city.

Shanghai was so big! Places in Auradon were spread out, but dense. Corona especially had upwards of twenty thousand living in it, but the space was isolated and small. Arendelle had about fourteen thousand, and China had thousands and thousands of citizens, but they were spread out or packed into small cities. Mal couldn't imagine how many people this could hold.

She saw people try to retreat as she circled the city. In the very center, she could see a battalion being forcer into smaller spaces from all sides. They'd arrived just in time. She finished circling the city and then landed back on the southside to aid her warriors. Fearlings had rushed out of the city and straight into the arms of their attackers. As battle broke out, Mal rushed into the center of the city.

The place was a maze! How could anyone find their way anywhere? Mal dashed up one street, down another, took a left and realized she was back where she'd started before she conjured her purple wings with a little growl and took to the sky.

In the center, where she'd seen people being crowded, the Fearlings were being forced back. She dropped into the midst of battle and held her hands out with green light shining from her fingertips. A few Fearlings tried to approach her, not recognizing her, and with a few muttered words she blew them into particles of that nasty dust stuff that the nightmare horses were made of. The flammable substance...
Mal lit the next one on fire.

Fire was such an effective tool. As the fearling panicked, it spread more fire around, squealed to its friends what was going on, and then continued to run around and catch other things on fire as Yi's battalion stepped away to let the elements fight their battle. "Go on!" Mal yelled. "Head to the outskirts! I'll meet you all there!"

It felt so, so good to be in the midst of battle again. She'd forgotten what it had been like on the Isle - a fight every other week, always defending yourself, always trying to prove your strength. She'd forgotten what it had been like to be the best of her field; the leader and the one warrior who everyone looked for on the battlefield. The one person who, when she stepped to the plate, everyone looked around for with a whisper of 'this is gonna be good'. Part of her wondered why she'd left it behind. The other part knew perfectly well why and was wondering why she hadn't come up here ages ago. She could have been fighting. She could have been leading. She could have been doing everything she'd been brought up doing and fighting for what she knew was right.

Why had Ben ever wanted to go back?

Of course, she knew the answer to that too. Ben enjoyed a fight, but only on friendly terms. Places you could shake hands afterward. But Mal had fought for her life. Sometimes, she'd fought for her life for fun. Sort of like now.

"I'm going to finish this war," Mal thought with a smile as she blew another fearling up and then ducked so one flew over her head and into more flames. Gods, she didn't even have a sword with her! She was doing this all without a sword and it felt great! So much better than being locked inside the palace and lying to everyone and-

"What on earth are you doing!" Someone shouted from above. Jack Frost landed in the center of the circle and, as Mal was still ducked down, spun his staff in a circle to put all the flames out. He turned on her with this deep panic in his eyes that reminded Mal of how Ben had looked when he had yelled at her in their room. "You have no armor on and you're battling these things all by yourself? Not even battling - you're toying with them! You don't even have a sword! What happens if you use too much magic and start to die?" He brandished his staff at her in a moment of intense anger. "You want to be up here, fine, but you can't be rushing in like this - all reckless! You're going to kill your child before you even finish the first term!"

"Oh my gosh!" Mal snapped. "Stop lecturing me! You have no idea what you're talking about!" She stood up and pounded a finger into his collarbone viciously.

"Really? I don't? I'm a father, Mal. I know how these things work!" Jack yelled right back at her. "Are you even thinking about Ben? It's selfish enough for you to be up here but now you're running into a battle against Fearlings, which can possess you, with his kid and no armor and no means to protect yourself! Good grief - I know you have a brain, so use it!"

"I'm not Elsa!" Mal snapped. "I've seen pregnant women do a lot more than what I'm doing! You and Ben both want to treat me like an invalid! I'm not even showing yet! The kid barely even exists!"

"You've seen pregnant women doing more than fighting monsters that literally possessed a good man and turned him into a guardian of shadows with no weapons and no armor and a little bit of magic and lots of theatrics? You've seen them flying over oceans and curing incurable diseases and leading countries?" Jack challenged. Mal curled her lip and opened her mouth to retort, but Jack cut her off coldly. "Go home, Mal. That's your place now. It's your place for the next few years of your life. You belong to your family now. Good mothers don't put their families in danger like this."
Good mothers don't. Ouch.

"Get off your high horse, Jack," Mal spat. "My kid doesn't exist yet. You actually have two physical kids. Good fathers don't leave their partners to raise the kids by themselves."

She spun around before she could see the hurt on his face and apologize. Quickly, she grew her wings out and took to the sky.

Good mothers don't. Good mothers don't. Good mothers don't.

She watched Stewart cut down a fearling on the outskirts of the city and landed beside him. "I'm back," She announced. "Where is everyone?"

Stewart wiped his brow and pointed to the west. "Most of them headed that way. General Lonnie thinks they might have had a hiding hole. Is there any chance you can tone the heat down? It's too hot in here."

Mal held her palms up and envisioned pushing the wall of fire away. It moved according to her will, just like the barrier to the Isle did. As she did, she spotted several fearlings trying to escape towards the east. Stewart readied his sword, but Mal stopped him. "Wait," She hummed and then put her hands on the ground to search for the mines underneath. As a group of three moved over a mine, she sent a pulse of magic through the ground to it. The fearlings were blown sky-high, shrieking in surprise and pain as their bodies disintegrated into dust.

Across the battlefield, she heard yells of triumph as Fearlings disintegrated and burned out. A little smile stretched across her mouth, despite her seething rage at Jack. It looked like it was about to be a flat-out victory.

Then, off in the distance, she heard a sudden yell of panic. There was an odd sound like a whistling or a whittling or like someone was scraping their sword on something really, really softly. Then something electric green leaped through the wall of fire. She almost didn't see if for a second because they blended so well into the flames. They looked like little green statues, though she couldn't tell their features from so far off. She watched them barrel through her to her army, and then people's bodies started flying into the air. They moved with inhuman speeds and unrealistic flow. It was almost as if they were cutting out as the fought. Here one moment and then gone the next. She had no idea what they were.

"See if you can find Jack Frost," Mal told Stewart, holding out her hand as a silent request for his sword. He gave it to her, and she frowned a little to feel how heavy it felt in her hand. She hefted it into a good grip and then took off towards where the majority of the soldiers were. Where'd Ben's sword gone after she'd brought it back to Auradon? She'd have to see if she could hunt it down.

She saw one of the green warriors holding down a soldier as a fearling screeched, trying to make eye contact for the poor person. Mal sprinted for them, sliced the fearling away, and then turned to face the monster. It looked like it was made out of jade or some other gem. She swung, they ducked, and then her feet were knocked out from under her and she was gasping for breath as they pressed a jeweled bow into her throat. She kicked them off, and they flew for a little bit, but then they pulled something from behind them and used the bow to shoot it - a quill? It was some sort of porcupine monster, made out of jewels, and it could shoot its quills at her. She used her sword to deflect it and was a little surprised to see the long scratch that was left behind on the metal.

Mal summoned her magic about her and glared at the warrior. "Jeweled monster, strong and true, make these gems bust their moves!"
As the porcupine drew back another quill, the bow snapped. They tripped in surprise, and then tossed the bow aside to struggle to their feet. Unfortunately, Mal's spell refused to last long, and she'd angered the other warriors. Something - a snake - hit her back, knocking her face into the dust of the earth with a hiss. Her chin slammed into the ground. A monkey and a crane seized her hands and yanked on them so she was spread out before forcing her to her knees with her head arched back over her neck.

One day, if she lived through this and managed to survive this pregnancy and when the war was just a memory, she'd tell her kids this story. Just to watch them roll their eyes in disbelief when she got to this part. Because out of the mists, a large green panda appeared in front of her. A panda with eyes glowing the same way hers did. Maybe they had the same type of magic?

She saw the punch coming in time to put a shield up in front of her. A blow that might have killed her otherwise reverberated back with a clang before a flurry of kicks and punches hit her magical shield. The snake tightened its grip on her shoulders and Mal focused on making her skin hot. Hot enough to steam... hot enough to burn... hot enough to melt the jade straight off her shoulders and into the-

Her shoulders were freed. Her shirt was singed and smoking, but she was able to rip her arms forward and shove her shield forward into the panda before whipping around and seizing the crane. Liquid green leaked past her fingers and dropped onto the ground. The crane flapped away and then came free missing its legs, which dropped to the ground with a solid thud.

Scores of ice dropped from the sky and coated the monkey before it could pin her again. Jack Frost, she was noticing, had an uncanny habit of coming in right at the last second. He landed next to her, but Mal refused to even look at him or thank him as she watched the crane land several yards away. She hit her knees and Jack panicked, grabbing her shoulders, before whipping his hands back with angry burns stretching across his fingers. Mal's gaze went into the magical realm, trying to feel out how things were built around her, and she gave off a large pulse of magic that sent the crane up in an explosion. When the dust cleared, it was gone. Nothing remained.

Soldiers were falling all across the land. Several of their attackers - other jade zombies and a few remaining fearlings - turned their gazes to Mal. As they rushed towards her, Mal triggered the landmines under their feet. With deafening roars, jade zombies and shadowy hypnotizers went up in smoke. However, these landmines were closer together, and a couple Mal hadn't meant to trigger went off as well.

"We need to get everyone home," Jack yelled. His hands were still scorched and his face was twisted in pain. "If we're not careful, then-"

A fist flew into the side of Mal's face - one neither she nor Jack had seen coming. She went down hard and felt something seize her foot, whipping her body straight back in the direction she'd fallen from and slamming her in the ground. A burst of ice coated the area, but the zombie - the large panda Mal had pushed back earlier - kept his hold on her foot. He shook off the ice and then started spinning her faster and faster until her eyes were sliding together in her head and she had no idea the difference between the sky and the ground. Then, with Jack shouting incoherently around her, he released her.

Mal soared through the air, past her wall of flames, and then into the pressure-triggered landmine area. She barely had time to put a shield up around her body before she collided hard with the ground and felt it give way and open up beneath her. She was tossed back into the air, gasping for breath, and a dozen nearby landmines blew up around her. Shrapnel bounced off her shield. She stayed still, gasping for breath in the cloudy air for several seconds, and then slowly got to her feet.
Fifty feet in front of her, the wall of fire gave way to a frantic Jack, who froze everything down before rushing towards the dust. Mal grew her wings out and, with a few mighty beats, lifted into the air. When Jack saw her, he almost fell out of the sky in relief.

"Let's get everyone home," Mal gasped, pulling her second snowglobe out of her pocket and returning it to its original size. "Get to the north and get everyone there out. I'll handle this side."

Jack hesitated. "Will you be able to manage it?" He asked.

"Yeah," Mal nodded. "Just go." She turned away from him and hurried back into the fray.

Lonnie's forces had dwindled and were mostly corralled into a single area. Mal rushed forward, racing past the jombies as they paused, waiting for a window of attack, and then threw the snowglobe down in the center of everyone. "Go!" She yelled and watched people immediately begin to vanish. She turned and, at the edge of the enemy front line, let off another landmine. It must have been attached to a chain because the explosions stretched towards the city in a line before vanishing. Sparse soldiers dashed through the jade warriors to the portal. Mal tugged a sword out of the hands of a fallen comrade, ignoring the face of the person, and then braced her body for an attack.

Something moved on the far left, and Mal whipped around as another jombie rushed forward. She blew up another land mine, and these, too, created a chain reaction heading east. She followed the trail with her eyes, anticipating where it was going, and her heart dropped into her feet when she spotted someone dashing towards her.

"Stewart, wait!" She yelled and threw out a hand to stop him, but an explosion suddenly separated him and her. She saw a body fly through the air, arching above everyone's heads, and then slam into the ground.

Mal didn't really realize she had moved until she was beside him and he was already struggling to his knees with his hands covered his face as he shouted in pain. Deep lacerations were in his arms, but Mal was a bit more concerned with his face as she seized his wrists and tried to pull them away. Slowly, she pried his hands from his eyes and felt stomach acid rushing up her throat. Only everything she'd ever witnessed before on the Isle of the Lost kept her from throwing up.

Half of his eye was gone. It had been blown out along with a chunk of his cheek. She could see the tops of his teeth through his face. And the eye itself was white and bloody and mushy with parts of it dripping out and sliding down his cheeks and into his mouth by his teeth. Mal gagged. It looked like a wet, white bouncy ball that someone had ripped in two.

"What's wrong?" Stewart demanded, grappling with his hands to grab her wrists. "What is it? Why can't I see? What's hurt? What - what is that taste?"

There were no words. Mal stared, gaping like a fish with her mouth opening and closing and her brain felt like shutting off as tears leaked out of her eyes. She let out a strangled sob, and then the world went foggy and intense and loud. Her body quit obeying her brain as she withdrew into herself, covering her own eye with her hand and trembling, trembling, trembling.

Lonnie came with a soldier who hoisted Stewart up and out of Mal's vision before seizing her under her shoulders and pulling her back towards the portal. Part of Mal understood that the battle was over and she was going back to HQ, but the other part was still locked on Stewart and reliving the way he'd kissed Sophia goodbye and how it was all her fault. Part of her understood that this was just a panic attack and she'd be fine in a little bit, but the other part was shaking and trembling and horrified and thought this was going to last forever and ever and ever and ever.
She saw in pieces after that - North's proud face, Lonnie squinting in confusion as she tried to figure out why Mal wasn't responding, the white of the hospital room making her head throb even more. Stewart's entire head was bandaged up. His left eye should be fine; yeah okay. There were two hundred dead; that was more than she'd thought. They wanted to check on her baby - was it still okay? A doctor with brown hair was touching her - why? Jack was glaring at her a little and the cold gel across her midsection almost brought her back out of the pounding in her head but it didn't and so she laid still, unresponsive, silent, mourning, on her back as they skimmed some sort of tool across her belly. shehateddoctors shehateddoctors shehateddoctors shehateddoctors. People to cut her up like she was meat and give her pills for death and who smiled as they patted her belly without permission and confirmed that everything was fine.

The panic attack really only stopped when the ward was quiet and Stewart was sleeping on his back on a cot beside her and Jack was perching above them, watching over them and the other wounded. She sat up, put her hands to her baby underneath her skin where she kept trying to forget it and then kept one hand there while she pressed the other to her eyes. Her eyes that were there and that weren't mush and that she hadn't destroyed. And she sobbed until the feeling had come back into her feet and fingertips and heart.

She thought Jack would yell at her about how he'd been right or about how she was a bad mother or a bad person, but all he said before he flit out of the room to leave her with her ghosts was "You did good."

"Get out of the palace," his mother had commanded. "You shouldn't stay locked up. You're getting sick."

"Where would I go?" He'd whispered.

"Go visit someone. Go visit... go visit Aziz. Or Jane. Or Mal's friends. They haven't seen you since before you left. Or go visit Audrey."

"I don't want to," He'd shaken his head, sitting on his old bed where he'd hidden the first few days of Mal's life in the palace. "I'm not ready for anyone to see me."

"Well, you would probably be more ready if you would comb your hair out and shave and-"

"Mom. Please leave me alone."

"Ben. You can't spend the rest of your life like this."

"Yes, I can, Mom. Or at least for a little while longer. It's just... easier like this. Let me be, okay?"

"Ben, if you love me, you'll listen to me."

And now, the gravel of the dock was crunching under his feet and the Isle jacket he'd only worn once was hanging off his frame like some sort of poncho. He'd lost so much weight... he felt like he might blow away. The smell of the fish had made him sick when he'd first been helped out of the car with his hat pulled down over his eyebrows and ears and his eyes trained on the ground. All food had been making him sick recently. He couldn't seem to get all of the sand out of his mouth, and it probably wasn't helping that he spent every evening and morning trying desperately to throw up all of the sand in his system, but he really didn't know what else he should be trying when this curse was building under his skin and just begging to be released.

Kids were playing on the beach and adults were running errands in stores and going to work all over the place. Perfectly normal, war-free lives.
He wondered where Audrey was. Mal had mentioned she'd been spending more time on the Isle. He hadn't exactly called ahead.

Ben shoved his hands into his pockets against the biting cold and wandered through the city, which had been steadily growing since summer, towards the closed gates to the Rotten Isle. He hovered outside and wondered, if he happened to wander out, how quickly it would take for someone to find him. How much would they hurt him before they finally killed him? He'd have to be sure they couldn't figure out who he was or he'd turn into a hostage instead of-

"What are you thinking?" Someone called, and Ben jumped away. He hadn't even realized he'd reached out and put his hand on the gate. He wiped the frost off his hands as a tall, imposing man with blue hair approached him. It was evident that Hades hadn't recognized Ben right away, as he paused when he realized who the young man was in front of him. "Well, if it isn't my son-in-law," he raised an eyebrow. "Thought you were up north. How goes it in the land of royalty?"

"It, uh, it goes," Ben stammered, shoving his hands back into his pockets where they were safe and not suspiciously hovering by the gate. "How goes it in the Underworld?"

"There's still room for your soul, if need be," Hades assured him. His gaze flickered between the gate and Ben.

He almost wanted to take Hades up on his word but didn't want to sound absolutely insane. Instead, he scuffed his feet until Hades brandished a hand towards the city and the two began to walk up. "Where's Mal?" Hades asked, putting his hands into his pocket as well.

"She, uh," Ben paused. "Did she not tell you? She came to the Isle to tell everyone." He turned his head to search Hades's face for any sign of recognition. The God of Death looked confused.

"I've been gone in the Underworld," He admitted. "Last I heard, you were dying from an incurable disease. I went to give you a free pass in case you kicked it."

"Yeah, she - uh - cured it," Ben explained lamely. "Burned it out of my system. And, uh, she took my place. She wanted to go north to fight."

"And you let her?" Hades sounded surprised. "Well, that'll be good for her. She'll like getting away from Auradon after everything."

Ben swallowed. "Yeah. I did want her to stay behind but she chewed me out for holding her back and I realized I can't exactly keep telling an adult how to live her life."

"She could stand to listen to better judgment for another year or so," Hades shrugged. "How long will she be up there?"

Ben sighed. "She'll be back by March at the latest because I begged her."

"Well, hopefully, she'll keep herself safe. And again, it'll be good for her. Your kingdom burned holes in her patience." Hades elbowed Ben a little as they passed into the city. They wandered past tiny shops and the government building and then started weaving through the towering apartment complexes.

"I'm worried for her," Ben confessed, shaking his head. "I don't want her to overdo it or anything. I wish she'd just stay here but she's always been obsessed with her freedom to go places."

"Well, she grew up out there," Hades scoffed, turning to point back towards where the gate was. "And this last month was hard, Ben. She didn't like Auradon chasing her down to set her on fire
over and over. I was starting to get worried they'd drive her straight to her grave."

Ben flinched. It was hard to think of it in such hard terms. "Ugh, I know. And then this whole mess with my parents and the laws and the baby..." He shook his head. When had things gotten so complicated?

"Madison?" Hades asked with a furrowed brow. "What's wrong with her?"

"Oh, not Madison," Ben shook his head. "She's fine. My parents take care of her. I haven't seen her since I've been under the weather, but-" He stopped in his tracks and then searched back through his head. "Did Mal not tell you?" He asked in a soft whisper.

Cold crept down his spine and he was sure that Hades could feel it too. "Tell me?" His father-in-law whispered.

"She..." Ben trailed off. This wasn't how he'd ever wanted to tell Mal's dad about this. "She told all of Auradon before she told you?" He asked.

Hades blinked slowly and Ben saw him ball his fists in his pockets. "Baby?" He prodded softly.

"Mal's pregnant," Ben confessed. "We... in the summer... we're going to have a baby."

Hades's hair burst into bright blue flames. People glanced over at them. "In the summer?" Hades repeated in a dull, still tone.

"I thought you knew," Ben apologized. "I'm so sorry."

"You got her pregnant?" Hades asked, voice still low and still.

"We... neither of us were thinking," Ben shrank a little. "It was after Maleficent's funeral... she's known about it since before I left."

The fire in Hades's hair went out with a little poof. Hades leaned against the building they'd stopped by with a defeated expression. "Well," he muttered. "That... explains a lot." He looked back over at Ben. Ben wasn't sure which he preferred; the deep, dead stare he was currently receiving or the deadly, angry look. "And now she's fighting."

"I hope she stays out of the battles," Ben tried, "But she wants to hunt down the woman who tried to kill me."

Hades pushed a hand through his hair, looking exhausted and devastated and confused all at once. Ben shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Are you angry?" He asked in a whisper.

It took a long time for a response to fall from the God's lips. "No," He whispered. "I figured, from the beginning, it'd happen. I'm glad you love her and you're not just using her. But Gods - she's a kid. Couldn't you have waited? I thought you'd be more responsible. I mean, I'm not angry. I'm just... disappointed. In both of you."

Something shriveled in Ben's chest. He hadn't ever had someone use that word on him and hoped to never hear it again. Disappointed. He twisted his hands and shook his head. He was disappointed too. Disappointed in his inability to keep her safe. Disappointed she wanted to leave so badly. Disappointed in his uselessness. "I'm... hoping I can convince her to come back. Maybe you can come up to the palace to be with her?"

But the light in Hades's eyes had gone out. He examined Ben with a pensive expression. Then, with
a little rasp in his voice, he spoke back up. "She's going to die up there, isn't she?"

"No!" Ben exclaimed, pushing away all of the bad thoughts. "No! No, she won't!"

Hades turned away and closed his eyes. "She's already finished almost all of her prophecies," He moaned. "That's... that it for her, I guess. I'm not going to see her again." Tears slipped out from under the God's eyes. Ben tried to step forward to put his hand on the God's shoulders, but he stepped away, waving his hands away. "Just... don't forget to invite me to see the funeral," He requested. "Thanks for taking care of my girl, Florian."

The God turned and strode away quickly. Ben didn't even have time to follow before he'd disappeared into an apartment building and was gone.

His fists closed, driving his nails into his palms. Hadn't he sworn that he'd keep her safe? That he'd be her refuge? That he'd protect her? He'd vowed to stay with her to the eternities. Maybe he'd been a miserable failure of a human being the last few months, but gods above and in the underworld, he was going to keep those promises until his dying breath. Ben wouldn't let Mal die.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Chad's death at Syracuse. Mal cannot raise the dead without dooming herself. Ben attends Chad's funeral.

Former King Adam hesitated outside his son's office as he watched the young man examine a list with almost crossed eyes. Part of him didn't dare lean against the doorframe. Part of him wanted to walk in like it was still his office and start asking questions. With a swallow, he raised his knuckles and tapped against the door.

It took a while for Ben to look up. When he saw his dad, he pushed his chair up and made a motion to invite him in.

Adam stepped in and swallowed. "It's almost lunch," he whispered. "Are you hungry?"

Ben shook his head. "Not really," he declined.

The back of Adam's throat was burning, but he swallowed and nodded. "Can I bring you anything?" He asked.

Ben looked back down at the list, and then back up at his dad. "I don't need anything," He sighed. "But... I'm a bit confused about these records. Do you know what we're exporting from the Isle?"

Part of Adam wanted to fall down in shock while the other half perked up. "Weapons and war supplies," He nodded. "It's cheaper to have them made over there, and the Isle does good work. They have a small factory set up which is very busy, and they have other things going up." He put his hands into his pockets. "Eliza, Mal and I all coordinated it. Mal wasn't able to have much part in it, but she approved the whole thing.

Ben furrowed his brow. "The Isle... has a factory?" He asked slowly.

"Well, a repurposed building," Adam clarified. "We sent a construction team out there though, and they have their own construction workers in-training. So now they're building a place that Evelyn designed. I think they also have a city hall going up, a library, and a few different schools. Mal put a lot of things into order before you left and things got insane on Auradon's end."

"Wow," Ben hummed. "What are they importing?"

"Raw materials," Adam shrugged. "Metals. Things like wires and what they can't make themselves yet. They put out almost no trash - a very resourceful people."

"They would be," Ben nodded, picking at the paper in front of him. "And no food or anything?"

"Mal still lets them import a few treats, but they have systems that the magical people and Evelyn worked together on. They're okay, sustenance-wise," Adam cleared his throat. "They cut out a farmland outside of the city walls and extended the barrier to bring in more fresh air from the sea and everything. They're going to keep cutting into the rotten part of the Isle and cleaning everything as they go."
Ben nodded solemnly and closed his eyes. "Since Mal put those things through, I'm just not very busy. I didn't realize how much time I spent trying to make people get along."

"Are you doing okay?" Adam asked. He eyed his son's slumped shoulders and defeated demeanor.

Ben clicked a pen twice and then set it down. A lot of his nervous tocks had gone away since he'd become king. Adam remembered teen Ben struggling to get through meetings without tapping his leg or a pen or something. Fidgeting when people fought. It had been a long time since he'd paused to look at his son, not just his legacy.

"I still feel like I'm being attacked," Ben murmured, drawing Adam out of his thoughts. "It's like I never really left Duloc. I'm still just waiting for Helena to finish me off."

"Like you're still stuck in a nightmare?" Adam asked, recalling what it had been like to be free of his own curse for the first few months; always panicking when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, trying to prove himself to everyone, avoiding all animals and constantly wanting Belle to be around as some sort of physical proof that he'd changed.

Ben nodded softly and folded his arms. "How did you get over it?" He whispered. "I don't even feel comfortable in my own skin. I can still feel myself dying."

Adam paused. Some days it was easier, other days not so. For a long time, he'd convinced himself he was over it, but lately he wasn't so sure. "Maybe I never did," he whispered. "You shouldn't be expected to get over something so traumatic. It's okay to hurt."

Ben looked up at him with a little sigh. "Thanks, dad," he whispered. Adam had a feeling he was talking about a lot more than just explaining the paper or talking with him.

Adam nodded down at the paper. "Do you have everything under control?" He asked.

Ben nodded. Adam twisted his hands. "What helps?" He asked, tone low.

Ben thought for a second and then gestured to the space in between them. "This does," he whispered. "It's nice to not be alone."

Adam shivered, remembering all those long years of being shut up in his castle and shunning the servants. How cold and empty and numb it had been. "It is," he agreed.

Chad peeked around a metal post and watched the queen as she marched down towards him. She looked like a murderess with skin-tight black armor and thigh-high combat boots. Her purple hair and her horns made her look like an eerie reminiscent of her mother. Behind her were giant warriors made of tree bark with glowing eyes, which held spears and made the ground shake when they walked. Other creatures that looked like flying eels, multi-teethed flying fish, fae and fairies walked behind her.

"We're taking the Easter Tunnels in," Mal was telling them as she opened a door into a storage room. She picked up two swords from a stand beside the door and turned to offer them to some of the fae. "The ground close to the castle isn't mined, so we'll be safe. I want to take the front entrance if at all possible so we don't get lost as easily.

Chad fumed. "Where are you going?" He demanded, stepping forward and leaning against the doorway.

Mal turned around. Several of her fae companions took up defensive positions around her as they
realized he was there. The Fae Queen herself examined him, looking a little tense, and then passed out the swords in her hands. "I have orders to take Syracuse today. We want to knock Eris down a peg and take the castle so we can start moving prisoners into the catacombs."

"Orders from who?" Chad barked.

Mal frowned. "Myself." She scoffed. The Moorish citizens rolled their eyes at Chad and then turned. They had decided he wasn't a threat. Chad felt at his hip for his sword and fumed. Syracuse. His raid. She was leaving to do his raid.

He'd lost his throne, his credibility, his friends and his leadership roles. There was no way he was letting her take this too.

The throne room of the Syracuse palace had been transformed into a sweltering golden desert. Eris swirled around and basked beside the window, even though no sunlight shone through the clouds outside. Twenty yards to her left, her daughter lay sulking.

"At least he's dead now." She growled for the fortieth time, trying to catch her mother's attention. Eris didn't even let a sigh escape her lips as she rolled her eyes. All morning, her daughter had been complaining about the short, small, purple-haired queen that had destroyed Duloc. Eris hadn't even believed her ears when she'd first heard what had happened. A stronghold in the middle of the land had been fallen in less than four minutes. Indeed, by the time Jack Frost, Hiccup, and Astrid had appeared, the army had been decimated and Lord Farquaad fled with his people. Four minutes. It took longer than that for Eris to steal the book of peace and frame Sinbad years ago.

Helena kicked a pile of sand aside. "That woman was horrid, mom. I'm so happy she's gone."

Eris opened one eye lazily. "You keep saying that, but what do you expect me to do? Perhaps it was only your lack of experience that made her seem so scary. The least you could have done is gone straight to Tartarus. Then the war tribunal wouldn't have known about you." She sighed and stretched her hands up, above her head. "Oh well." She repeated in a dreamy tone. In her opinion, Helena had more than proved Eris's suspicions. The girl wasn't ready to fight - wasn't ready to be seen. Try though she might, she was tender-hearted and soft. Maybe her powers were strong - as had been planned - but Helena still didn't know how to use what she and Pitch had given her.

"No, Mom. It wasn't that I'm weak." Helena growled as she busied herself making and burying holes in the sand using her powers. "She literally lit the entire town on fire. The flames appeared at her feet. And she could become a dragon." Helena scowled as she let the sand trickle through her fingers.

Truly, it was this information that had troubled Eris. An Auradon queen that could become a dragon? There wasn't anyone she knew with this power. She had assumed the queen would be similar to her king - probably beautiful, as she would have to be someone to look up to and the king himself was not bad eye candy either. Doubtful a woman of power would be trained with a sword as he had been. Nonmagical, a fierce, stubborn spirit, and possibly a little bull-headed. Eris wasn't quite sure what to make of the description Helena had returned with. A talented swordswoman with vibrant hair who spoke in a half-sweet, half-sour tone and could somehow pull her body to the form of a dragon with a wingspan the size of entire buildings and who could use spells and charms to summon things to and from her. And she'd discovered the flammability of Pitch's magic - a secret they'd long since kept with few incidents.

Helena huffed and kicked a wave of sand into the air, where it sprinkled down on top of Eris. Eris made a face at her daughter, who shrunk back, and returned to lounging beneath the window. No
sooner had she relaxed than the doors to the throne room were pushed open, and a small, bright, colorful creature appeared, swinging above the sands. It landed by Eris's head. Eris flicked open an eye. "Yes?" She asked.

"News from the war tribunal." The troll informed her. "The Queen of Auradon has returned to the land. The King of Auradon is still alive and recovering in Auradon. They say she intends to destroy us all."

Eris sat up and looked over at her daughter, who had grown pale. "You couldn't even kill the man properly?" She sighed.

"I scratched him! He should have died! He was already dying when she stole him back!" Helena defended herself.

"There is more." The troll spoke up. "A squadron has appeared outside the castle. They are heading towards the front doors."

Eris groaned and stood up. "I suppose I have to go and rake them across the coals." She sighed. Her flyaway hair drifted around her face as she stood and walked towards the door. "Come, Helena." She called over her shoulder as she swept the sands away from in front of the door and opened it up.

Helena followed after her mother as they went forward onto a balcony where long ago, Proteus had sent Marina out after Sinbad, the famous pirate who had last defeated Eris through her own promises. They looked down and watched as an army marched up toward the palace. Helena whimpered when she saw a head of purple hair leading them up to the doors of the palace. Eris's eyes narrowed.

"What a strange looking army," Eris muttered as she looked at the warriors. There were giant creatures that looked like they had grown right from the earth, lumbering behind someone shorter than her daughter. They were armed, but with no shields or means of protection anywhere. All unprotected. "This should be easy," She muttered and lifted her hands. The sands in the room they'd vacated rose to attention and rushed out towards the invaders. Eris's pets gathered to attention around the palace, crowing down from the roof in amusement. Roc, in particular, appeared and began to circle the castle. He was a large, festhered bird with talons that could slice through rocks and a beak strong enough to break down trees. Eris laughed manically and unleashed her sands at the group. The warriors continued to walk forward without giving her a glance. A gleam appeared in Eris's eyes.

Before the sands could hit the group, a green barrier flickered into place. The sand hit it and was veered sharply off course. It hit the water down before with a pattering. Eris's smile vanished.

Roc dived from the sky, but as he grew close, three wooden warriors with glowing eyes raised their spears and loosed upon the gigantic eagle. The bird crashed into the beach below and moved no more. Eris's straight-mouthed expression turned into a frown. "Come, Helena." She snapped as she began to head towards the hall again. "We have guests to greet."

"Mom." Helena's voice quivered. "Maybe we ought to simply go to Tartarus? She's so-"

"I will not have a vibrant-haired queen chase me away." Eris cut Helena off. "Come now." She began to descend a large staircase, heading towards the front doors. Somewhere far below, the doors banged open. Helena winced as she heard wood splintering.

Eris dissolved into shadows, and Helena followed. The two women slipped through the dark
portions of the palace and found the place where Mal was leading her army up a staircase. Her eyes were bright as she marched without expression. With her confident air at the front of the group, no one noticed the lone Auradonian soldier in the back.

Eris materialized at the top of the steps before Mal could reach the last stair. The two stared each other down at a maximum of five feet apart. After a few second's hesitation, Helena rematerialized beside her mom. Mal's eyes locked on her with a chilling glare.

Eris put her hands on her hips. "So, you grace my home by ripping down the doors? How courteous. I'm pleased to see Auradon has manners."

"I'm only returning the favor." Mal smiled. "For my husband's treatment, you see." Her gaze settled on Helena, who bowed her head but did not show any other fear.

"Ah, yes." Eris smiled. "How is Ben? Cold and stone yet?"

"No," Mal answered. "He's well on the road to recovery. It took me being awake for two days, but we managed." She stepped up the last few steps and drew a sword that hung at her hip. It was Ben's, with his name written in at the grip. Mal had finally located it in the items that she and Stewart had brought up. Helena's eyes flickered over it, and she looked up at her mom.

"Why." Eris chuckled. "I took that sword as a trophy. Your husband handed it right to me. What a beauty it is." Mal readied her grip on the sword and continued her death glare. Eris tilted her head at Mal. "Perhaps your head will make a nice companion to it." She offered.

"Attack," Mal commanded her companions.

The room exploded into action. Several fae women dropped to the ground and began to chant. Grass, shrubs, and vines popped out of the floor stone and began growing a path to Eris and Helena. Helena screamed as all of the stone warriors readied their spears. Pixies fizzed into balls of fire that flew towards them, burning their skin wherever they touched. Eris's eyes grew red as she summoned all the sands at her disposal, siphoning everything she could reach out of Tartarus and pulling it into the room. Two long swords appeared in her hands as she rushed at Mal. She raised a sword and tried to bring it down on the queen's head, but her sword slid right off as if Mal was encased in a sphere. The young queen smiled widely.

As Eris continued to try to stab holes in Mal's shield, the sands swirled around Mal's allies and began to overtake them. The Pixies were extinguished, and the sands began to drag the wooden warriors down. But there was one thing Eris hadn't accounted for her sands.

The Fae would decide this battle.

One Fae man who was dressed in blacks and whites rose up and began to chant. Wind whipped through the hall, scattering the golden sand everywhere. Storms gathered in the hall, and rain began to fall. As the sands moistened, they became harder and harder for Eris to control, until suddenly she had nothing at her disposal except for her two swords and her whimpering daughter.

Pitch's sand couldn't get wet, but Eris's could. And once they were wet, they had the consistency of thick mud. Useless.

Mal lunged forward and swiped at Eris's legs. Eris jumped back just in time to avoid a nasty cut and dissolved as Mal tried to stab her. She tried to appear inside Mal's sphere of protection, but no matter how hard she pushed, found she couldn't. No amount of pushing, hacking, or sheer will could help Eris force her way into the angry girl's protection circle. She re-materialized and
screamed in frustration.

Mal swung towards her side and Eris nearly lost her balance and tripped. It had been a long time since she'd fought with nothing but a sword. She snarled and threw her hands against the shield, which splintered a little though it quickly began to heal itself. Before the cracks could completely disappear, Eris hammered her fists against the shield again and her fists broke through, closing around Mal's neck. The young queen might have been strong, but she was no goddess.

Mal could feel chaos magic seeping into her throat as Eris squeezed. She grew light-headed - was it the magic or the lack of oxygen? Pixies were bouncing off Eris's skin, trying to burn her, but to no avail. Mal grabbed Eris's hand and twisted down, under her arm under she'd gone around the goddess and Eris was forced to release her.

Chaos magic was still spinning inside of her head. It felt like she'd been awake for days... running for hours... fleeing for her life. She lashed out with a frantic hand and Eris caught her wrist and sent more magic into her skin. Goosebumps rose up on Mal's arms. Chaos. Chaos just like the Isle of the Lost with her mother in a deranged state and everything out to kill her. Chaos just like being brought to Auradon and the lights were too loud and the sounds too bright. Chaos just like her life was and would always be.

Mal lit herself on fire, and Eris jumped back with a scream. Her sands might not be affected by flame, but she was. Angry burns stretched across her grey skin. Mal lifted Ben's sword to deal a lethal cut and then something seized her arm and pushed her away from Eris, past her forces, and down the stairs in a heap. She skidded off the steps, knocking her chin against the wall and her hip against another. She dropped the sword to keep from cutting herself and someone else snatched it up.

It was a man in a messy Auradonian outfit.

"Chad?" Mal gasped in surprise as she struggled off the stairs. "What are you doing here? Give me that back!"

Chad raised Ben's sword high above his head like he was in an action movie. "No! I am a hero!" He declared. "Everyone thinks I'm not because of you, but I am! I deserve to be king; to be remembered for my accomplishments! I can do what Ben couldn't; I can kill Eris!"

"You're going to kill yourself!" Mal protested, raising her hand. The sword flew from Chad's grip with barely a protest, but he only unsheathed his own blade with a determined look. He swung the sword at Eris's neck, and she shattered it with a wave of her hand. Chad looked shocked. It reminded Eris of Sinbad's executioner when she'd done the same thing before Syracuse had tried to execute Sinbad. She vaporized and reappeared inches from his face.

"A hero?" She sneered. "Someone obviously forgot to teach you the golden rules."

"No!" Mal yelled as Eris flung her hand out. Chad flew off the staircase, with sandy rain sticking to his hair, and hit the wall across the room with his neck. A sick crack echoed around the room. Chad fell to the floor with blood flowing softly out of his head. He did not move again.

There was the sound of a sword being sheathed. Eris turned and watched Mal crack her knuckles. Ben's sword had returned to the sheath at her side. She crossed her eyes, and her irises lit up with a green so fierce it looked like she had a forest growing behind her pupils. Eris raised her swords and prepared to attack, but a force unlike any she'd ever felt before stopped her. It felt like iron was being clad to her body, and she couldn't move.
"What?" She gasped and stared at Mal. Eris's body began to float upwards. She still had no motility in her arms or legs. Mal was controlling the magic inside of Eris's body. "Helena!" Eris cried. "Stop her!"

Mal smirked. She redrew her sword, keeping focused on Eris. Helena desperately pulled a sword from the wet sands on the floor and rushed at Mal with a "Hei-ya!" At the last second, Mal turned and parried Helena, and Eris vanished into sand. Immediately, she was gone. She had left.

"I have a bone to pick with you," Mal growled as she pushed Helena back onto the floor, seized her wrists and used her still-functioning vision of the second realm to seize Helena's magic. Her head throbbed as she did - she wasn't sure this was good for her - but she kept at it. Helena struggled and squirmed but could not get free. She yelled and cried, but Eris did not reappear.

"You almost killed my husband." Mal hissed. "He almost died because of you."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Helena cried. "Please, let me go!" She writhed and thrashed.

"I'm through with you." Mal hissed. "I don't have time to deal with villains-in-the-making, and you've already hurt too many people."

"No!" Helena writhed. "No, no! It's not my fault! I didn't do it!"

"I am Queen of the Moorlands," Mal declared. "Your magic belongs to me. You don't deserve it." A sudden burn scorched up Mal's arm. She dropped Helena with a gasp, but there was no need for the girl to be restrained anymore. She screamed and fell to the ground, shaking and writhing. The warriors of the moorlands gathered around and watched as black sand leaked out of Helena's skin like it was being sucked straight out of her and dissolved into the air. Helena's black eyes lightened to blue, and her hair became an auburn shade. Her skin was a tan brown and there wasn't a hint of magic underneath her skin.

Mal stared in shock and then pulled her sleeve up slowly. While she was sure she'd been burned, there wasn't a mark on her arm. Underneath her skin, the magic was still spinning as if nothing had happened.

When Helena finally came to herself, the first thing she did was try to sink away into the shadows. She found she couldn't, and stared in horror at Mal. Her mouth started moving in panicked, pleading motions, but Mal couldn't hear a thing. Helena couldn't speak anymore.

A fae put a hand on Mal's shoulder. "That was a fitting punishment." She commended.

Mal pulled Helena to her feet and handed her off to the person behind her. Helena's mouth was moving, but no sounds were coming out. "Why can't she speak anymore?" She asked. "What was that?"

"Her magic must come from our place in Auradon, somewhere down the line," The fae thought aloud as she passed Helena to two guards. "As queen, you are able to decide who gets to use the land's magic. Just don't overuse the power, or you'll hurt your magic and the land."

"And her voice?" Mal asked softly. She didn't plan on doing it again. She could still feel the scorching heat on her skin and her head was throbbing as she pictured all the color draining out of Helena's frame.

"We say spells out loud for a reason. Language is a type of magic," The fae explained with a hint of sorrow coming into her tone. "And conversation is a spell."
Helena covered her new face in her hands and sobbed silently. Mal began to usher them down the steps. "I will take her to the tribunal, and I will see her banished to the Greater, no, Lower part of the Isle."

Mal glared at the young girl. "The part where villains live." She told her. "Maybe in a few years, you may petition for life on the Greater district of the Isle."

Mal looked over at Chad. His body was still slumped at the base of the wall. "Someone please fetch him." She whispered. "His body will need to be returned to his parents."

Two strong Fae nodded and walked over. They hoisted Chad's body at an angle, and his head lolled impossibly. The hit against the wall had shattered his entire neck and back. They carefully balanced his weight between them and began to leave the palace. Mal turned to those still around here. "Search everywhere." She commanded. "Find the Book of Peace and restore it. If you see any living thing, capture it. I'm told Eris has small, colorful creatures called trolls that she uses to do her spying. Her pets should have vanished with her, but if not, kill them."

Mal focused on the Fae with control of waters and storms. "Eris's sand doesn't react kindly to water." She thought out loud. "We should experiment with that and see how far we can press that weakness."

He nodded and grunted in reply to her. Mal turned and lead a small procession of a battalion plus one body out of the palace. From the shadows, Eris growled as she watched the Auradonian queen lead her discolored daughter away from the palace. Helena had been right; Eris had never known a person with as much power as this young child.

Did her power come from the place she called the moors? Had she inherited the power from her parents?

Eris slammed her fist into a brick and it cracked underneath her knuckles. Her first real loss in this war, and her daughter with it. She didn't know who this queen thought she was, but Eris made a promise unto herself to see her death.

"Chad is dead," Mal announced, pausing inside the door to the war tribunal. Everyone looked up, stunned to see her so soon. Then her words sunk in and an awkward, regretful tone settled over the room.

"I did not know you were taking him?" North asked. "What happened?"

"He must have snuck into the tunnels behind us," Mal shrugged. "He wanted to kill Eris. I think he was hoping it would redeem himself."

Astrid exhaled and pressed her fingers to her forehead. Hiccup shook his head and dropped an arm around her shoulders. Mal watched everyone steady themselves. They'd known death before, and Chad's death wasn't rocking them too badly. She'd seen death too, and she had no reason to be regretful, but she couldn't believe she'd been so stupid to let him sneak in after her.

"I need someone to take his body to Auradon to his parents," She announced. "Immediately, if possible. His mother and I have spoken and I don't want to leave her waiting for information." She glanced to Bunnymund, who exhaled and straightened up. "I can do it," he announced. "Just give me a moment."

Mal nodded and then walked away. Chad had been temporarily put in the sitting room. She hesitated at the door and then crossed her arms and stepped inside.
What did blood smell like? Mal couldn't exactly place the scent. She peered over the edge of the coffin and examined the way Chad's neck had swelled up and was tilting his head to the side. It was unsettling to see the way his chest lay still when his back was completely shattered. Slowly, she set a hand on the edge of the coffin and examined the dead man. All she could picture was the hot-headed mean spirit who had announced he'd bed her and grabbed her butt.

When she'd first seen him in Ben's old photos from school, she hadn't imagined they'd ever have anything to do with each other. Hadn't imagined the ways he'd hurt her and hadn't anticipated his reaction to her. Hadn't imagined she'd be a witness to the death of one of Ben's old friends. Poor Cinderella... to hear everything her son had done before he left and returned a corpse.

'I did everything I could," she told herself. "No one blames me. He knew what he signed up for." He had gotten what was coming. A fool's death.

Mal twisted her hands and examined Chad's magic, glancing into the second realm. Like Ben, he was almost invisible. What was scary to Mal was how alike he seemed to his surroundings. It was as if he were an object instead of a former person. The only thing that remotely signified it had once been a young king was the smallest traces of Chad's spirit here and there. Mal reached out for the threads and then pushed her own to her fingertips before willing Chad's to grow stronger. Chad's body wracked violently and the dead man's mouth opened and he screamed in utter agony. Mal's skin went icy. Chad's corpse was screaming. The green flames underneath her skin turned a violent shade of red and nausea twisted her stomach.

"Mal!" Someone shouted from the door. Strong hands seized her shoulders and wrenched her frame back, away from Chad. She momentarily glimpsed the strong, white, swirling ice underneath Jack's skin before she was staring into his deep, intense stare as her vision returned to normal. "Are you crazy?" He demanded. "You can't resurrect the dead!" His breathing was heavy, and his heart rate panicked.

"Leave me alone, Jack," Mal demanded, pushing him back.

People appeared in the doorway - Auradon soldiers, Astrid and North and Tooth, even Lonnie. "His time is past, Mal," Jack demanded her attention with a voice that cut her up like knives. "It's not right to mess with that balance. You could hurt yourself beyond repair."

Mal shook her head, twisting her hands as the images of her magic going red flashed before her eyes. Beyond repair. She could have contracted magical poisoning. She gave a hard, sharp laugh. "Thanks for the warning," She snapped and then waved her hand at the coffin. "Just take him away, then. Now I can really say I tried everything." She turned and strode away. the crowd outside parted as she came through, but Lonnie grabbed her hand before she could move too far and gestured to her eyes.

"Your eyes are bleeding," She whispered. Mal lifted a hand to her cheek, found it wet, and nodded without emotion before she continued on. She only allowed herself to stop when the shadows around her became dark and she was alone. When the air was still and when she couldn't hear the whispers and when everything was... okay.

Ella was enchanted with Dizzy from the moment she saw her. The little girl had the brightest, most bubbly personality Ella had ever seen. And she was talented and hard-working. While Anastasia and Ella spoke quickly to each other, Dizzy worked on three different customers at once. Dizzy was exactly the kind of little girl Ella would have liked to have had if she could've.

They'd found Rob Paulsen, and Ella, after speaking to him, had decided it would be best to give
him permission to live on the Isle instead of in Auradon, where he lived underneath a bridge, having been chased there by the people of Cinderellasburg for having married a villainess. Anastasia cried for joy when she was told that her husband had remained faithful to her all these years, always believing they would one day have their happily-ever-after.

Ella's heart was full of joy when she returned alone to Auradon that night. Audrey had sheepishly admitted plans to stay overnight. Ella had boarded the ship back and watched Audrey's mouth break into a smile while she waved excitedly at a young man who blushed when he saw her. She took her car back to Charming Castle and smiled brightly all the way up to the family room, where she knew she'd find her husband.

She pushed open the door with jangling keys and the scent of blood hit her nose. Her smile dropped off her face as she saw her husband standing in the room, looking down into a coffin. A large pooka stood beside him, patting his shoulders. A moorland creature?

They both turned and looked at her when she shut the door and moved so she could approach the coffin. An awful feeling told her she already knew who was inside.

Poor Chad laid in between the two wooden walls. He'd been cleaned as best they could clean him and put in a new outfit. Her son's head lay at a bad angle. Ella could immediately see that her only son's cause of death had been his crushed spinal column.

"M'sorry." The pooka croaked. "Queen Mal said she gave him orders ter stay behind and he went anyway. Tried to creep up on Eris and cut her head off, and she flung him into the wall across the room without hesitation. Died on impact. Last words: 'I can kill Eris.' I'll give you the full statement if you want."

"I'd like it," Henry whispered as he rested his palms on the side of the coffin.

"I am a hero!" Bunny whispered. "I deserve to be king; to be remembered for my own accomplishments! I can do what Ben couldn't; I can kill Eris!"

Henry turned away, shaking his head with bitter tears welling up in his eyes. "Stupid boy." He mourned in a hollow tone. "Oh, son."

Ella kissed her son's head and whispered: "Thank you for bringing him back," before she turned and fled out of the room.

The news that Chad Charming was dead dealt a heavy blow to the kingdom. For years, everyone had felt bad that Cinderella had had only one son when she'd wanted so many children, but the idea that that one son had been taken from her hurt everyone's souls greatly. For years afterward, it would be said that on the day of Chad's funeral, that everything from the worms to the king came to mourn the prince's death.

On the day of the funeral, Mal called Ben early. "Good morning," He said. Like when he had been gone, the sink was kept filled. Ben had let Mal borrow the stone basin, so she could call at leisure.

"Good morning," Mal waved. "Ben, I need you to do something."

"Yes?" Ben asked, leaning on the countertop in the bathroom.

"I need you to go to Chad's funeral," Mal told him.

Ben's heart immediately fell. "Mal..." He groaned, covering his dark eyes with his hands. He
hadn't even gone outside on the balcony since coming home, so afraid was he of someone seeing him. When he'd gone to the Isle, it had been covered and in a country where people didn't usually know him right off the bat and no one had expected him.

"Ben, she lost her son. You need to go down to her. You can't hide in the palace forever. Today's a better day than any. Go and comfort her for me." Mal stared Ben down as he squirmed. The last few days, she had been performing so much magic and using her double vision to track Eris and Pitch withersoever they went on the land that her eyes seemed to have a permanent light in them, and she could not withdraw her horns very far. Mal assured him they wouldn't last long, but they still made for a stern look while they were there.

Ben laid his chin on his hand. "I don't want the people to see me. I don't want to… slip up and reveal myself."

"That sounds like a selfish reason not to go comfort a mother at her son's funeral." Mal frowned. "If you had died instead of being changed, who would you have wanted to comfort Belle?"

Ben collapsed into guilty groans. But Mal still hadn't played her strongest card. "Ben." She called for his attention from down below. "I need you to tell her that I would have saved him if I could have. If you love me, you'll take that message to her."

Ben slumped over and banged his head onto the granite. "Okay." He sighed. "Okay, fine."

"Thank you." Mal smiled at him. "I owe you."

"Lots," Ben confirmed with his head still down on the countertop. "Can I bribe you to stay here after the baby is born?"

Mal's face twisted. "For how long?" She asked.

"Not in the palace; just in Auradon," Ben responded. "I'll go north. I just want you within an hour's fight distance, please."

Mal drummed her fingers on her side of the connection. "I don't know," she whispered. "What if I want to visit?"

"Mal. Please?" He picked his head up off the desk and gave her a long stare through the water. He watched the fight behind her eyes and then she caved a little.

"If the Moorlands aren't needed anymore," she decided softly. "Okay?"

"Okay," Ben agreed. He figured that was the best he would get for now. Later he'd talk to her about Agathe, but not now. Not while she was so far, not while he was struggling as much as he was, not for a while.

"Thanks for not making me stay," Mal whispered. "Now and back when I first came to the palace. All that time driving and taking me places... Thank you. I got used to the palace, but the time outside really helped me learn to like it. It was always nice to just leave life and politics and everything behind."

"I know." Ben nodded. "You like the adventure feature of life."

"I mean, don't get me wrong!" Mal exclaimed. "I love you. To bits and pieces. It's just you want to stay in a little more than I want to. I'll still hang around and I know you want that family thing, so I'll walk that road with you. But I have a calling in life that I don't see changing anytime soon."
"I know." Ben smiled. "And I love that part of you."

Mal blushed a little. "I'm going to head out soon. End this war. I'm getting sick of being attacked. Heck, I'm getting sick."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "Sick? Do you have some sort of illness?"

"No, Ben." Mal rolled her eyes. "Your kid is making me sick. I'm exhausted and I'm sick, but I'm also still really pissed at Pitch and Eris. Extreme rage is literally the only thing fueling me right now."

Ben laughed. "I think you're the only thing keeping me going. I wake up in the morning and I think: Mal is up and leading battles in the Overland, I can get up and be King for a day. Otherwise, I'd just be hanging out and feeling sorry for myself."

"Glad I'm good for something." Mal chuckled. "I'm going to go now. You're going to that funeral?"

"Yeah." Ben sighed, slumping forward. "I'll go. I promise."

Mal blew him a kiss. "Bye, sweetie." She whispered.

"Bye Mal." Ben sighed. The connection fizzed out and Mal's image disappeared. Ben rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock that sat on the counter. He had about four hours, and he knew he would need every second to get ready.

Ben started the shower as hot as it would go and took a long shower, letting the hot water scorch his skin. After thirty minutes of doing nothing but standing under the hot stream and letting the water burn him red, he got back out and wiped the mirror down.

He looked like he'd had a minor sunburn or gotten tanned. As the air gradually cleared, he watched his skin grow lighter. For almost a minute, he looked like he had before he'd come back from the Overland. He looked strong, and tan, and happy. And then slowly, that color too faded out of his skin, and he was once more pale with dark eyes and sunken cheeks.

Ben picked a lighter colored suit out of his closet and dried his hair in such a way that it hung forward on his head. He found a tie and a tie pin in the shape of the Auradonian crest, and then went down to the library for his mother's approval.

She was sitting on a couch facing away from him when he entered. He walked up, put his hands on her shoulders, and rubbed them for a few seconds while she tucked a bookmark into her book and set it in her lap. She looked up and smiled to see him. "Why, don't you look handsome." She said. "That's a bright suit."

Ben nodded. "I don't want people to notice my eyes." He whispered.

Belle frowned. "Your eyes look lovely, dear. They're mysterious."

"They're dark." Ben sighed. "I just… I feel different."

"You act differently." Belle swung her legs over the couch. "You're sad all the time."

"Mom, look at me." Ben shook his arms. "I'm pale, my hair and eyes are different, I have snakeskin on my face, and I look like I've lost twenty pounds."

"You might have." Belle pursed her lips. "You haven't been eating, you've been staying inside all
day, moving slowly." Belle stood up and took her son's hands. She pulled his chin up with a stern look. "Now, look at me." She directed his eyes to hers. Ben sighed and shifted uneasily. "You go upstairs, and you pick out one of your best suits, no matter how dark blue. And you bring a comb down because I am going to fix that hair of yours. You are reportedly sick, no one will expect you to be as you were. Don't take any thought of your eyes, brush your teeth, and hurry your butt because you've only got an hour until you have to leave to be on time." Belle turned him around and gave him a push.

Ben didn't argue. He went back upstairs, changed, brushed his teeth, and brought a comb down within ten minutes. Belle combed his hair back off of his forehead and patted his cheeks to bring a bit of color back into them. She showed him what he looked like on her phone. Ben wasn't exactly comfortable with his reflection – he was still pale, and his eyes were still dark. But he looked kingly, not like a drunken rock star.

Ben handed his mom's phone back and took several deep breaths.

"You can do this," Belle assured him.

"I hope so." He said. He gave her a big hug. "Thank you." He whispered into her hair.

Belle smiled and swatted his arm. "Go on, now. Send Ella my regards."

"Are you not coming?" Ben asked.

Belle's expression grew sad. "I doubt she'd want to see the mother of a son who lived just now."

Ben stared at her in surprise. A heavy weight fell on his shoulders. That was exactly how the kingdom would see this. Two people had returned, both kings and only one had lived. He suddenly understood the soft importance of Mal's message. 'I would have saved him if I could've.'

Ben nodded and left the palace. The car had been returned from Kuzko's palace after Lumiere and Sophia had gone to get it. Inside, an empty basket sat in the passenger seat and the seats were set to Mal's size. Ben squeezed inside, reset the seat, and began the trip to Charmington alone.

He parked inside the palace circle behind Ariel, Aurora, and Snow White. He locked the car and headed to the back. Chad's funeral was being held in the backyard, and he was going to be buried under a beautiful tree near the east of the grounds.

Dozens of rows of white chairs had been set across the lawn for people to sit on. The weather was weary, and the grass crunched with frost as Ben walked. The trees on the grounds may have protected from the winds, but cast dark shades across the area.

Hundreds of people were there, but no one recognized Ben as he walked up. He felt the urge to keep his head down, but a thought struck him. This was not about him, or his new look. It was about the Charming family, who had lost their son in a war he had started.

Ben went straight to Queen Ella, who was in the front, by the casket. A line had formed to shake her hand and give her a hug. Ben fell in line behind a small girl with a pretty bouquet and a shiny butterfly hairpiece. The line moved slowly, but eventually he made it to Queen Ella, who looked miserable. She hid behind a veil with her hair curled. She wore no makeup, not even waterproof makeup, and clutched a blue handkerchief as she stared numbly at the coffin.

"Your Highness?" Ben asked softly.

"Thank you for coming," Ella said distractedly, with a quiver in her voice. King Charming, who sat
beside her, took her arm.

"Dear." He murmured in her ear.

"Can I sit beside you this day?" Ben asked Ella as she looked up at him and focused on his face.

"King Ben." She sniffled. "Yes, please." She released his hand as he took a chair to her left and shook the hand of the next person in line.

"Queen Ella, I have brought you a message from my wife," Ben said softly. Ella turned her weak smile towards him, and Ben saw King Charming fall quiet as he listened in on what Ben had to say. Ben took Ella's hand and rubbed the cold that was started to set in them. "She asked me to tell you, with great emotion, that she would have saved Chad if there had been any possible way. It is my belief, even if everyone had told her there wasn't a way, she would have tried until it was finally beyond her powers."

Queen Ella's eyes filled with more tears, which she dabbed at frantically. "She's a wonderful girl," Ella muttered as she cried. "Just wonderful."

King Henry leaned forward to examine Ben. Ben stiffened under his gaze, but Henry only raised his eyebrows and sat back. Ben tried to relax, but Queen Ella pulled her hand out of Ben's in confusion. She held her hand up to the light and dark blue sand filtered through her fingers. Ben's heart nearly stopped.

"That's odd," Ella muttered. "Sorry about that Ben, I must have put my hand down on something."

"Oh, think nothing of it, Queen Ella," Ben said hurriedly. "If I may, how did Chad die?"

"His own pride killed him." Henry sighed sadly. "I always knew it would get him into trouble."

"A pooka, which is a large bunny, if you don't know, came by to explain what had happened."

Queen Ella sniffled. "He was told to stay behind while the Moorish people marched in on a castle but followed anyways. They found out he had followed when he jumped out of nowhere and tried to cut Eris's head off."

"Bunnymund is his last name," Ben said carefully. "E. Aster Bunnymund. I worked with him on the war tribunal."

"What happened to you?" King Henry asked softly. "Why did you come back?"

Ben swallowed and clasped his hands together. He could feel sand appearing in between his fingers. "A lot of it is still being kept on the down-low while I'm recovering." He whispered. "But... I was supposed to meet with another leader, so we could lead a small, decisive battle on a castle on the Overland. Eris, who is a villain we're fighting against, is a shapeshifter. She took the form of the person I was supposed to be meeting, led me away from the group, and got us all. Hook, line, and sinker. I was held for two or three days, and... they poisoned me."

Ben swallowed. "And the rest is as told. Mal left the palace in the dead of night, flew all the way to the war council, basically told them she was going to attack the place I was being held captive all on her own, she fought a battle against a villainess we didn't know we were fighting and brought me back."

Ella took her husband's hand. "Poisoning." She whispered. Ben got the distinct feeling they were finishing a conversation they'd started hours ago with that one word.
"She really would have done everything for Chad," Ben whispered. "She would have saved him if there was any way."

Ella smiled sadly. "She has no death power." She whispered. "He was gone too fast for her to bring him back."

Ben nodded sadly. "She's... going to get the person who did it, if that gives you any consolation."

"It does, though it shouldn't." Ella hummed. A pink-gloved hand appeared in Ben's vision as someone offered their hand to Queen Ella to shake. It was Audrey, who dipped to the ground and kissed Queen Ella's hand with tears in her eyes as she smiled sadly at the Queen. "Audrey." Ella smiled. "How are you? Did you have a nice time with that boy on the Isle?"

Ben jumped back as if he'd been electrocuted. "Boy on the Isle?" He asked Audrey.

Audrey blushed. "What, did you think I wouldn't ever get over you?" She teased, kicking his ankles lightly with her toes. "Yes, I did. I was so sorry when I heard what had happened to Chad, though." Audrey's eyes filled with tears that she hastily tried to wipe away. "I feel really bad." She whispered.

"Don't be, dear." Ella squeezed her hand. "Everyone knew you were the best of friends, no matter where you ended up going with your life."

Ben wasn't certain, but it sounded an awful lot like everyone was implying Audrey had permanent residence on the Isle. Boy? Where she was going? Audrey continued to kneel on the frozen ground in front of Ella. Ben moved a seat over so she could sit down. "Dizzy loved meeting you." Audrey swallowed. "She made you a present when she heard. I have it here." Audrey reached into her pink winter coat and withdrew a white box with finely tapered edges and presented it to the queen. Ben couldn't resist leaning over Audrey's shoulder to watch as Queen Ella lifted the top and pulled out a beautiful gold cuff bracelet with multiple layers and colorful beads strung to and fro across the sections.

"Oh, how sweet." Queen Ella sniffled as she lifted the accessory and showed it to her husband. "She is such a talented, beautiful girl. I would bring her to Auradon if I could." Queen Ella's eyes widened as she realized what she had said, and she abruptly looked up at Ben. "Pardon me. I misspoke."

Queen Ella might have been concerned about dropping political hints around Ben, but Audrey wasn't. She turned to Ben. "Does the Isle and Auradon have any joint policies on who can come and go?" She asked curiously.

"Ah-uh." Ben stammered, completely caught off guard. "Well, I would assume that anyone who was originally banished there in the first place would have to stay, but outside of that..." He shrugged. "I'd have to ask Mal what she's doing."

"The queen offered to sanction Anastasia's husband," Ella said with a furrowed brow.

Ben stuttered. Audrey nodded in agreement. "Yeah, and she's kind of been throwing the idea of me staying on the Isle if I want."

"It couldn't be that she's okay with people coming to the Isle but not people leaving." Ella reasoned softly.

"She's probably going to handle it on a case-by-case thing for a while longer," Ben said quickly. "But I'll definitely ask her if you're... are you interested in bringing people over?" He blinked in
Audrey flushed. "Well, I don't know. It probably wouldn't just be us. Like, Evie has a brother too. I'm just… curious."

"You want to bring that boy you like to Auradon?" Ben asked. Audrey's face exploded into a deep shade of red. "It's okay!" Ben exclaimed, holding up his hands. He couldn't really explain why it shocked him so much that Audrey had met someone new - he'd been expecting it for so long that he should have been surprised it hadn't already happened. "Just curious… Queen Ella, why are you interested?" He quickly averted his eyes from Audrey as she covered her face.

Ella bit her lip. "I'm just curious… whether we can bring children from the Isle? Dizzy, for example, I would be interested in adopting my step-sister's daughter if she'd let me."

Adopting… children from the Isle…. Ben's head was spinning. He sat back in his seat and brushed sand off his hands. "I'll definitely ask her what she thinks." He promised. Ella nodded and turned to the front as a pastor came up, shook her hand, and started the ceremony.

Ben tuned out most of the ceremony as he brushed the dark blue sand off his hands and bit his cheek to remain calm. During the retelling of Chad's life, Audrey reached over and took Ben's hand to squeeze it quickly. She tried to be discreet about how she brushed the sand off on her skirt, but Ben got the feeling King Charming had noticed something.

Ben didn't stick around to shake anyone else's hand after the funeral. He bid Queen Ella goodbye with a promise to ask Mal about her terms for Auradon-Isle migrations and headed outside. He knew people had probably already taken dozens of discrete images and was tired and ready to go home already. As he got into the car, his phone buzzed. He glanced briefly at the headline. It read: "Is that dragon-skin on King Ben's face?" He groaned and shut down his phone.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Short chapter featuring Ben trying to fix things at home while Mal struggles a little in the north.

This is pretty short, but I didn't honestly think that much needed to be added. (TBH, this was the average chapter length back when I first started writing this) If you want to see something specific, LMK in a comment and I'll see.

From their bedroom, Ben could hear someone calling his name. He'd managed to return to the master suite even though Mal's absence continued to rip at him. In her absence and with much of his former work now being taken up by the kingdoms, Ben tried to find simple ways to busy himself. He read - something he hadn't really done since he'd started preparing to be King, dabbled a little more in the laws that had meant so much to him before he'd left for war, and then went down to the storage rooms to pull out all the old boxes of his things. Photos and awards from Auradon Prep, favorite books with white post-it notes lined up in the margins, old clothes from when he was younger and toys he'd enjoyed as a child.

In the north, Auradonian soldiers picked their way around cities, surrounding them and smoking out enemies. Rabbit holes opened direct portals to the Isle of the Lost. There was some unrest in the city as monsters and villains appeared on the other side of the barrier, but Evelyn kept the peace well. Ben knew that Mal had divided the war and Auradon would only storm strongholds on the west coast while her moorlands would take the east coast. Sinbad and King Triton had teamed up to rule the seas together. None of Eris's creatures were any match for the two of them combined. Outside of the weekly death counts and the mounting missing numbers, not much else came from up north.

Ben turned against the covers and buried his face into Mal's pillow. The covers were tangled all around his frame. If he kept his nose buried deep enough within the pillow and focused hard enough, he could catch her scent. It was going on almost three weeks she'd been gone. He was going to go absolutely insane at this rate. He kept his face covered, knowing the room was slowly growing lighter around him, but also knowing there was no reason to get up early because there wasn't anything to get done. Someone called his name again from the distance, and Ben grumbled as he began freeing himself from the mess. His feet hit the ground with a soft thud. He passed by his closet to grab a shirt before passing into the living room. No one was there.

Apparently, he was hallucinating as well as going insane.

He heard the sound of someone hitting their head against something echo through the bathroom and suddenly realized what he was hearing. Ben ducked into the bathroom, suddenly wide awake, and saw the reflection of a head full of purple hair with her head down on the edge of the basin as she took deep breaths. "Mal?" He asked, pulling up a chair beside the sink. She looked up with a gasp and he saw her face was streaked with tears. Immediately, everything in his head was flung out the window. "What's wrong?" He asked, furrowing his brow as he leaned forward.
"I'm sorry - I'm just..." Mal waved a hand at her eyes in a fanning motion to try and dry her tears. "Sorry. I just... we lost a lot of people today. Pitch and Eris... they have things we didn't know about and I'm just reeling, I guess."

"What happened?" Ben asked, stomach twisting as he stared down with mounting horror. "How many?"

"I think about one thousand people are dead," Mal hiccuped. "There's these stupid, stupid birds that eat human flesh. And she let them lose on one of your armies as they were going past a city. I'm so, so sorry, Ben."

Ben exhaled. "It's okay, Mal," he whispered. "I know you would have done something if you could have."

"I was on my way..." Mal shook her head. "But when I showed up there was just... bones everywhere. I just don't know anymore. There's so many people to protect and I can't keep everyone safe, Ben! I couldn't even keep Stewart safe and he's practically part of our family!"

Ben flinched. Stewart had come home early. From what he'd heard, his right eye couldn't be restored. It was too complex and too mangled. Even Mal had tried and failed - her magic wasn't in conjuring. She'd been able to heal Harry and fix Uma's back, but those things had already existed. She hadn't been growing back nerves and body parts. It seemed she couldn't. Ben hadn't seen Stewart more than twice while he and Sophia walked around the library or the grounds, but he was here.

Mal took a deep breath and pressed her fingertips to her forehead as if she were pressing back a migraine, which she might be. "Am I a bad queen, Ben?" She whispered. "People are dying and I'm just... not strong enough to keep everyone alive at once."

"You're not a bad queen at all, Mal," Ben reassured her with a soft smile. "It'll work out. You'll see."

Mal made a sound that was both a gurgled scoff and a heartless laugh. She wiped more tears away. "Sorry," She hiccuped. "I know I'm not usually like this."

"It's hard," Ben shrugged, feeling a little numb as he tried to console her. It was so easy to try and help her; why was he so down on himself? "And besides, it's probably just wonky emotions anyways, right?"

Mal's expression twisted. "Yeah, I guess," She agreed.

"I didn't mean it like that," Ben sighed. "Mood swings don't make your opinions less valid, Mal."

Mal nodded without a word. She looked like all the life and fight had gone out of her. Her skin was going grey and her roots black. "You need to spend some time in the moors," Ben said aloud softly. "You're looking off."

"So do you. Is the land okay?" Mal asked. "And the Isle?"

"They're both okay," Ben promised. "The moors wants you back, but they're very patriotic about the cause. Heaven help us if you ever decide to invade because your country likes to fight. Evelyn and Audrey are covering the Isle and I don't hear lots, to be honest."

Mal blinked blearily at the wall. "Audrey needs to pick a side," She muttered. "She wants to be on the Isle but she keeps fishing around in Auradon."
"She has a responsibility here," Ben tried to reason with Mal. "And, actually, that does remind me that Cinderella was asking about what your policy was for people going back and forth. She wants to look into adopting over there."

Mal's mouth fell open. "Adopting?" She asked, stunned. "Who?"

"Dizzy," Ben replied.

Mal threaded her fingers through her hair and accidentally knocked a fairy off her ear. Ben hadn't noticed before, but several of the little creatures were hovering nearby, trying to comfort the distraught queen. "Sorry." She apologized. "Um, I will handle it on a case-by-case basis. If it's a child of a villain, I'll approve that personally, if it's an actual banished person requesting garrison, Auradon will have to decide on that. Maybe you could do something similar to the Isle's system for city residency. They can reapply for garrison every five years. I'm going to start getting a city council together so they don't need me to do everything."

"A city council?" Ben sat up a little straighter. "What's that all about?"

Mal blinked down at him. "Every five hundred people gets to elect a representative. Anyone between sixteen and sixty. and then they can propose their own issues and solutions, but I get final say on anything."

"Huh," Ben leaned back a little. That was a good idea. And it got so many different people involved... "That's cool," He mumbled.

"I would need to know numbers," Mal sighed, changing the subject again. "Of the people who are interested in going back and forth and the money it would take to get people to and fro. Things like that. I can't focus on it right now, Ben. I know everyone is mad at me about it, but I have to focus on this war right now."

"I understand," Ben agreed. "And I support you."

Mal looked up with a small, stunned expression, and then a tiny smile slipped onto her mouth. Her reaction twisted his heart even more. How long had it been since she'd actually felt supported in something? "Thank you," she murmured.

"You're welcome," Ben paused to clear his throat. "Um, I have to ask though - we're all getting a little confused on Audrey's status. Is she an Isle citizen or is she still Auradonian?"

Mal frowned. "She's Auradonian. But ask her to start thinking about will happen with Auroria when she leaves."

"You make it sound like you already know she'll leave." Ben chuckled as he began searching around on the counter for some sort of writing utensil to note down what she'd said. Mal said nothing. He looked down at her and saw her biting her cheek in thought. "Oh," Ben said. "Is it... for sure then?"

"Audrey was raised to follow her heart." Mal shrugged. "And ever since she saved my life, her heart has been wanting something she never considered for herself before. She's not an Auradon girl any more than I am, Ben."

Ben blinked down at her and nodded. "You're both pretty out-there." He gestured to the far distance playfully. Mal chuckled and wiped the last of her mostly-dried tears away. Ben titled his head. "Mal, I have one more thing to ask," he whispered. "I know it's really, really early, and you haven't been talking about it, but I'm wondering if you want me to do anything for the baby so you don't
have to worry about it when you come back."

Mal immediately averted her eyes. "Like what?" She asked.

Ben shrugged. "I could have a room arranged?" He offered. "Things set up. Have Evie come help get a little wardrobe together. Just so you can come back and relax."

Mal nodded slowly. "Okay," She agreed. She glanced down to examine him, and exhaled. "Thank you for taking care of things up there," she whispered.

"Thank you for taking care of things up there," Ben replied. "Are you going to go now?"

Mal took a long, slow breath. "Yes," she replied. "I have to help everyone and then find those stupid birds."

Ben nodded. "Okay," he replied. "I love you."

Mal blushed a little and then hiccuped as she was suddenly forced to wipe more tears away. "I love you too," she promised him. "And when this is over, everything will be okay. You'll see." She looked up and glanced over at something that had apparently just called for her attention. "I have to go now. Goodbye." She gave him a last wave.

"Bye Mal." Ben smiled as the connection fizzled out. He looked up into the mirror and examined himself yet again. His cheeks had started to fill out again, just a little. He looked a little more like himself.

Ben drummed his fingers. "I need to do something." He whispered. "I'm not happy like this, but there's nothing I can do about it." He examined his dark, dark eyes, and chewed on his cheek. He went back into his bedroom, now lit, to grab a change of clothes and his phone before he left the room. He went down to the office and opened up the folder.

This was Ben's reasoning: He couldn't change his appearance, but he could change his character. He knew he was a good husband, a good son, and a good person, but there was one thing he knew he could do better. He could be a better king.

Something about the theory of councils pulled at Ben's attention. Someone to advise the kings from the common peoples. Ben chewed on his lip. If they had had a system like this in place for the Isle when it was part of Auradon, everything would be different now. The Isle would actually have been taken care of.

Ben pulled out a pen and paper and immediately set to work.

Hiccup helped Mal to her feet with a smile as she set aside the stone basin with a sigh. "Thank you," she mumbled, stretching her sore back.

"No problem," Hiccup replied, putting a hand to her shoulder blades as she walked past him. "You've certainly done a lot for us. More than you owed us. We certainly owe you and Auradon a lot."

Mal hummed. She wanted to ask him to stop talking. He'd only helped her up and told her she was needed; was the lengthy thank-you necessary? Hiccup kept talking and Mal caught snippets as he rambled on a little. "Completely brilliant... powerful as you... would make a fine queen for-"

"What?" Mal blinked a little and paused in the hallway. A soldier who had been walked towards
them dodged around them as she blinked up at him. "Sorry, can you say that last bit again? It sounded fuzzy to me."

Hiccup nodded in understanding. "I was just saying you really know what you're doing and you obviously have lots of experience pulling places out of ruts. It would be my personal goal to have you be Queen up here after all is said and done."

Queen? Her? Mal's mouth ran dry and her shoulders slumped with just the thought of all the weight. She swallowed and tried to force a smile. "I, uh, Ben and I, uh, we'll see," She stammered. Her head started pounding along with her heartbeat. Mal felt a bit like throwing up. She turned and continued walked. Hiccup continued chattering alongside her, completely unaware.

The sky outside grew dark and Ben cracked the window open to let cold air in as he paced, searching for more ideas. The door opened to his office, and he heard cooing. Ben looked up and saw Audrey, carefully bouncing little princess Madison on her hip. Madison smiled when she saw him and opened up her little fists to grab in his direction. The small child was almost four months old and had just learned to roll over from her stomach to her back, though she couldn't quite get back over again. Ben smiled when he saw them both.

"Hi!" He exclaimed. He picked up a pen off of his desk and handed it to Madison as Audrey brought her closer to the desk. "Nice to see you both." He said.

"Nice to see you too." Audrey smiled. She took a seat on one of the chairs that skirted the office. "What are you working on?" She asked.

"Oh." Ben frowned. "I just… started developing an idea someone had for the Isle, but for Auradon." He cleared everything off his desk. "What are you doing here?"

Audrey bit her cheek. "I came to ask if you'd talked with Mal at all." She shrugged.

Ben nodded. "I did." He admitted. "And she said that aside from Anastasia's husband, she doesn't want everyone to start moving around until she has an actual policy hammered out."

"Oh," Audrey said quietly. Madison sneezed on her lap and continued to suck on the pen Ben had given her.

"But," Ben hesitated. "She said to tell you to start thinking of who could rule Auroria if you leave. You know your parents won't want to be rulers forever."

Audrey frowned. "But… I've got to rule Auroria. That's my job. I have to make decisions and figure out what's best for the people."

Ben blinked at her. "Oh." He breathed.

Audrey gave him a strange look. "What?" She asked.

"Technically, you don't have to." Ben exhaled. He picked up the papers he'd just moved aside. "That idea I've been developing for Auradon? I want to give common people more say, but I don't want to lessen the sway of the royals. What if we could call a general populace every five years that will switch out with time, and they could offer suggestions on what they want to see happen in the kingdom, and act as counselors to the royals?"

"People have jobs, Ben." Audrey frowned. "And this is time-consuming. People will want to be compensated."
"I know, that's one of the problems I've been running into." Ben sighed. "But maybe you could modify it for Auroria. Set up a system so that the place rules itself, but runs through you for approvals." He held out his paper to Audrey, to took it and examined it. Madison tried to grab for it, but Audrey swayed it out of her reach with a chuckle.

"Do you mean, like how Mal runs the Isle?" Audrey asked.

"Mal has Evelyn and you to help her with it, not to mention me, mom, and dad if she needs." Ben reminded Audrey. "But if we work together, all things are possible."

Audrey pursed her lips. "I don't know, Ben. She said. "I'm the future ruler. It's my responsibility to rule Auroria. I might just have to… give up the Isle."

She tried to give the paper back to Ben, but he only frowned and refused to take it. "Anything is possible, Audrey. Auroria might be your responsibility, but you don't have to live there to rule it."

Audrey hesitated and looked back down at the paper. "What if the citizens of Auroria could vote on one person they wanted to represent them from Auroria and they and I could work as partners? Completely unconnected from me except the work they do, so it's unbiased. We can re-vote every two years." Audrey stood up and began to pace back and forth, bouncing Madison on her hip. "Underneath the two of us, we could have the standard advisory committee, except… the advisory committee might split over the two of us if our ideas differ…" Audrey trailed off, biting her lip.

"Dissolve the committee and propose ideas to the public when you need them. If you give multiple solutions, various experts from the crowd could have the opportunity to rise up and give advice." Ben suggested.

"That could take ages." Audrey frowned.

"Give it a week-long period." Ben proposed. "And you'll probably find, after a while, that like-minded people will band together."

"Political parties. Ugh." Audrey rolled her eyes. "I don't want this to be like in Municiberg where they outlawed supers for, like, twenty years."

"It wasn't that long." Ben murmured with a small smile. "But let's say that idea works; how does it solve the problem?"

"It splits the executive branch of the Monarchy apart." Audrey hummed as she thought. "That means that I won't have the same power as my parents, but I also won't have the same responsibility. And it also means I don't have to always be present in Auroria because someone who actually lives there will be there. I can still go back and visit, but since we have cell phones and WIFI on the Isle, all we'd have to do is call for an hour each day. Video conferences and such."

Audrey looked at Ben for approval. She bit her lip as he considered.

"It might work." He nodded. "It also splits the workload of running a country. And the blame scale. I mean, from a strategic point of view, if something goes wrong, there's two people to divide blame between them."

Audrey wrinkled her nose. "Not planning on the blame shift, Ben. We both know that causes corruption. But you're right; it splits the workload, so I won't have to stay cooped up all day. I could still teach classes on the Isle and participate with the Children's Services there."

"You teach?" Ben raised his eyebrow.
Audrey flushed. "English. I'm teaching one large college class and three more smaller groups of younger kids. In the afternoons and evenings."

"You've always been good at languages." Ben nodded. "Think you might teach French too?"

"Maybe." Audrey shrugged. "We need more English teachers right now since that's the most widely-spoken language. But I'd be willing to bet eventually Mal will bring over people to teach Mandarin, French, Elvish, all sorts of languages."

"True." Ben nodded. Madison squawked and dropped the pencil, covered in slobber, onto Audrey's foot. Audrey chuckled and picked it up carefully.

"Thank you, Ben." Audrey smiled. "I owe you and Mal a lot. More than you'll ever know."

"Consider it done." Ben smiled. "She and I work for the good of all."

Audrey laughed and hugged Madison's small body to her frame. "Don't I know it." She smiled and put Ben's paper back on his desk. "I'll leave you to work now. Have a nice evening and Merry Christmas."

The sentiment 'Merry Christmas' rang in Ben's ears as he watched her go. Almost Christmas and Mal still wasn't home. Ben bit his lip, picked up a different pen, and began to scribble. He wondered what Mal was doing up on the Overland.

Ben sat back into his desk with a hard sigh and the phone on his desk rang. He reached forward blindly, keeping his eyes closed, found the receiver and raised it to his ear. "This is King Ben, who is this?"

"Hey, uh, Ben. This is... uh, Ericka? From Arendelle?" A wary, hovering voice echoed through the receiver. "I... kinda need your help with something."

Ben opened his eyes and stared at the wall. Elsa's daughter was calling him. Okay. "Is this about your coronation?" He asked, rubbing his brow line a little. It wouldn't surprise him - Ericka was long overdue to take over the throne of Arendelle.

"No," Ericka declined. "No, I'm still not ready to be coronated. But, uh, I wanted to, uh, go north?"

"North?" Ben repeated.

"North," Ericka affirmed. "To the overlands?"

"It's not a vacationing spot, Ericka. There's a war going on," Ben told her.

"I know!" Ericka assured him. "See, Ben, I was hoping to go and, well, fight."

"Fight," Ben repeated, even slower than he had the first time.

"Why do you keep repeating me?" Ericka sighed. "Yes, fight. Your wife is up there, so why not me?"

"We, uh, have a draft," Ben blinked. "You could always sign up for that."

"I would but, uh, the draft passes under my mom's desk," Ericka trailed off uncomfortably. Ben leaned forward in his desk, setting his elbows on the table.

"Pause," He demanded. "Does your mom know about this?"
"I'm an adult, Ben. I don't need her permission," Ericka spat back.

"Does she know you're calling me?" Ben asked.

"This is my phone, Ben," Ericka grumbled.

"Yeah, okay, I guess you're an adult and you can technically go if you want, but why are you going behind your mom's back?" Ben questioned. "And Ericka, you're going to be coronated soon - you could be coronated next month if you set the date. We just lost Chad."

"She doesn't want me to go," Ericka growled. "But I want to go and I'm sick of being in this castle with nothing to do but pull the same pranks over and over. I've traveled to every kingdom there is and I do all of Mom's outside-Arendelle events and I'm tired, Ben. I want to go north. I want to fight. I want to have a chance to prove myself but Mom put my name on a blacklist and she and my dad have this pact that he'll freeze me and send me back if he sees me, and I can't control my powers enough to stop him. If I can just get up there and then keep away from him... I just want to do something to prove myself."

Ben had to pause. Was Elsa allowed to blacklist her own child? Those who were blacklisted were given exceptions due to mental or physical or... magic. Ericka couldn't control her magic. Therefore she could be blacklisted. Ben slumped his shoulders. "How is your control, Ericka?" He asked.

He could hear her grinding her teeth on the other end. "I... am close, Ben. I still have explosions and I can't control the ice coming out of me, but I can reel it back in. I'm safe."

"What if you're on a battlefield and you freeze allies or hurt someone with ice shards?" Ben asked, frowning a little deeper. "Listen, Ericka, I can appreciate wanting to leave the palace and go find an adventure. Mal is exactly the same way. But this sneaking around your parents? And I don't know if I could in good conscience put you out on a battlefield if you can't control your magic-"

"I can unfreeze things!" Ericka protested. "And it's usually not a lot - you remember when I was in the palace, right? And since you lifted the ban on magic everything has been so much better, I swear-"

"Ericka, your mom accidentally summoned an arc of lethal spikes in her ballroom on the eve of her coronation. And almost hurt everyone around her. How can I be sure you won't accidentally do the same?" Ben asked. A figure appeared in the doorway. It was Lumiere, frowning as he glanced into the room. Ben became aware of how loud he'd been getting and made a batting motion to shoo Lumiere away. A cloud of black sand appeared to slam the door closed with a mighty crash. The glass inside the door window shattered. Ben's blood ran cold.

"I won't do that! I... I can keep myself away or... what was that?" Ericka broke off on the phone as she heard the sound of the blast.

Swirling black sand suddenly took up a whirlwind around the phone as Ben stared, open-mouthed, at the busted door. A fine rain of indigo dust settled onto the papers on his desk. The latest death counts from up north shimmered even as the lights flickered a little.

"B - en, you - cutt - out," Ericka's voice glitched through the phone. Ben willed himself to calm down.

Don't use it, don't use it, don't use it, don't...

Oh, the irony. He was on the phone with the daughter of the woman who'd tried to 'Conceal Don't Feel' her magic away for almost twenty years, trying the same method out with the same disastrous
results. Proving all over again that he'd been correct to lift the ban. Ben slammed the phone down - using his physical strength, not the magical strength - and found himself blinded by a cyclone of sand. He fought his way through it, somehow knowing exactly where to go, and then slipped out of the office. Behind him, the sandstorm continued, swirling more and more out of control. In the hallway, Belle, Adam, and Lumiere were all standing, exchanging glances as Ben slumped to the ground outside of his door and covered his face with his hands.

Fear wasn't working. He couldn't live in fear - it wasn't protecting him from anything. All he was doing was letting that hideous power well up inside him and grow more and more out of control.

"Maybe we should talk about this," Belle suggested in a quiet voice. "Ben, what is-"

"I don't want to talk," Ben cut her off. It was a good thing his parents knew literally nothing about magic - nothing about how fearing it and not using it hurt your health in the long run. Nothing about outbursts and lack of control. They'd know what was wrong right away. "I know what's causing it, I just need some time. Can one of you please text Ericka of Arendelle and tell her my answer is no? I'll call her back when this dies down." He gestured to the screaming storm in his office and then let his head hit his door as he closed his eyes.

Lumiere exhaled and turned to walk away. Ben listened to his footsteps and then opened an eye to see his parents still standing above him, waiting. Belle took a few steps forward and then dropped to her knees beside him. She put her hands on his arms and laid her head on his. Adam stepped over his legs, sat against the wall, and then put his arm around his shoulder. Ben could hear the sandstorm dying down in the next room. He let his head rest on his Mom's and let out a deep sigh.

"We're still a family," Belle whispered when all was quiet. "You're still my little boy. No curse or war or any amount of time is going to change that."

"Thanks Mom," Ben let out a soft breath against her hair.

Adam squeezed Ben's shoulder. "And we're here," He promised. "We know you and Mal talk, but whenever either of you need us, we're still your parents and we'll always look out for you."

Ben sighed and relaxed a little. It was nice to be close. It was nice to be loved.

"I'm sick of this." Mal growled as she and Jack Frost hid out in a collection of jagged ice sculptures, all tinged with black sand. The area overlooked a gigantic valley in a circular basin down below. Dragons, Fae, Auradonian Trolls and monsters battled fiercely against the strong black sand stallions Mal had come to recognize as Pitch Black's minions. Auradonian archers and gunmen stayed up above and sniped carefully at the larger enemies.

The only Auradonians Mal knew of that were actively involved in this battle were the Incredible family, whose parents had been convinced by Invisigirl to come out of retirement, and their squad of super-human heroes. Now, on top of the Easter tunnels crisscrossing the lands and allowing instantaneous passage around the battlefield, there were also dozens upon dozens of portals that opened as windows to different areas of the battlefields and various different types of fire spread. However, the stallions had gotten smarter and knew now of their own flammability. They carefully skirted the flames and attacked those who caused them first. Where Eris couldn't work with water, Pitch Black couldn't work with fire.

Mal was sick. She was sicker that sick. She was beyond the point she wanted to throw up all her organs and become an internally-metal robot. It was the beginning of December now. The days were flying by faster and faster. Unlike when she visited the moors, however, she couldn't go home.
at the turn of the month. She was stuck up north with a two-month-old thing inside her, tracking a villain she had never even seen before.

"You'd think he would have shown up by now," Mal growled, slumping back and sliding down the length of the smooth ice sculpture she'd been leaning against as she clutched her stomach. "Ugh." She groaned and closed her eyes.

"Yeah, he is taking his time." Jack agreed with a disappointed frown. "Think we'll get him this time?"

This was their fifth time in two weeks trying to capture Pitch Black. They'd gotten close when they'd discovered him in the city of Chesterton, and Mal had managed to put up a barrier to prevent his escape, but then Astrid's dragon Stormfly had panicked and almost killed them all. Mal had been forced to let the barrier out, and Pitch had escaped.

Using a sample of the sand monsters, Mal had managed to scour the country and found this large gathering of them, which they had promptly decided to attack. The hope was that Pitch would show up to support his stallion army, but so far, they hadn't had much luck.

Mal squeezed her thumb to keep herself from gagging and growled. "Is it too much to ask him to make a quick appearance within the next thirty seconds?" She sighed.

Jack looked at her worriedly. "Maybe it would be better to wish him to show up in like, ten minutes." He said. "Are you going to be sick?"

Mal waved him off. "I'm always sick." She rolled her eyes. "I should call Ben and have him look up when nausea typically ends."

"Maybe you should go home?" Jack suggested.

"Yeah, after I kick Pitch's butt," Mal growled, pulling her knees up to her chest and burying her face in her black armor.

"Well, just speaking from, you know, a dad's perspective, I would much rather have Elsa and the girls as far away from this mess as I can get them. I'm sure Ben feels the same." Jack floated down and carefully patted Mal's back.

"Yeah, I know." Mal sighed. She felt her insides quench and turned away from Jack to be sick on the snow. Jack flitted away as Mal groaned and wiped her mouth. "Kay, I'm done." She growled. She pulled a baggie full of the same sand they'd been using to track Pitch's stallions with and squinted at it. "You say this was originally the Sandman's sand?" She asked Jack suspiciously.

"Yeah." Jack nodded. "When we faced him off the first time, we actually managed to turn it back into his golden sand, but that was back when we had these incredibly brave kids guarding us. Now they've grown up and died. We don't want kids on the battlefield anyway."

"Fantastic." Mal glared at the sand. She glared at the sands. The whites of her eyes took on a green tone. She no longer needed to endure cross-eyedness to see the second realm of magic. The tips of her horns began to emit a faint purple light as Mal worked. Beads of sweat began to pour down from in-between her eyebrows as she growled at the sands. Jack watched in amazement as the black began to melt out of the sand – or rather, the sands melted out of the black. Golden flecks rose skyward, like the sparks of a fire, as a fine mist remained in Mal's hand. This she slipped back into the baggie, leaving only a small trace in her hand. She held it up to Jack triumphantly.

Jack examined it and then exhaled and deflated. "I'm just going to give up on ever being half as
cool as you are." He mourned.

Mal chuckled. "I can just manipulate natural magic. I guess fear qualifies. You're still cool; you shot me out of the sky."

"You weren't paying attention." Jack said half-heartedly. Mal giggled and lowered her gaze into the second realm once more. She took hold of the black mist and examined it from every angle. Her wings were already appearing, growing from her shoulder blades. She rose up into the sky slowly, still looking closely at the mist in her hand.

"Ready to catch us a fear guardian?" Mal asked with a smirk.

"I was brought back to life for a reason, wasn't I?" Jack smirked at her.

Mal cackled, and the two zipped off into the darkness, leaving the battle raging on beneath them. Night falls, Pitch Black.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Ben begins work on baby room and Mal battles Pitch Black.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ben flicked on the light in the room next to the master bedroom and took a moment to lean against the door. It hadn't been used since he was about four his parents had decided he needed to be a bit further from them and closer to the front doors so he didn't have to run so far to catch the bus to elementary school. It made him smile a little to see the polished wooden crib covered with dust against one wall and the ceiling covered with glow-in-the-dark stars. The side of the crib had been pulled down to the ground so that toddler him could get in and out of bed without consequence, and all the furniture was tiny except for the large armchair in the far corner.

He went over and gently pressed on the mattress and felt about six springs give out underneath the pressure. The frame looked mostly intact, but the mattress and springs would all need to be replaced. Good thing there wasn't exactly a lot for him to do anymore.

The armchair was in similar condition with the fabric having grown old and thin and tearing easily and the internal components having rusted away. Ben pushed it out into the hall, trying to ignore how his magic pushed at his hands along with him, offering help he didn't want. Other things followed the chair - a tiny toy chest whose lid had fallen in on itself, the dresser which had mold stretching inside most of the drawers, and the shelves, which he removed so he could get a good look of the room.

It had been painted a light, slightly dull blue, but Ben wasn't sure it'd stay that color. The baby was going to be a girl; his first instinct was to paint the room pink, but Mal would have his head if she did. He knew he would have many regrets if he went with either yellow or purple(No offense to his wife; it just would look awful with the lighting and carpets) but thought it might be nice to have green accents in the room. If only he had Mal's talent with art; it would be nice to try and replicate the moorlands on one wall.

A large part of him was struggling with how to fill the room. The younger part of his soul felt like it should be fairly self-explanatory. If he was having a girl, then she could have a box of crowns and plastic heels and princess dresses to play with as she got older. And a prince would have the opposite. But this was Mal's daughter, and Ben felt like that justified a completely different direction. What if she liked dinosaurs or cars or books? He already knew she'd end up abdicating his throne, so would it really make sense to lay that pressure of expectation on her when she was yet so small?

"Knock knock?" Someone asked from the doorway. Ben turned and nodded at Sophia before he continued to examine everything. "What's all this in the hall?" She asked.

"It needs to be thrown out," Ben sighed. "You-you're the real Sophia, right? Not someone pretending to be her?"
Sophia's smile grew tight and panicky. "Has... someone been pretending to be me?" She asked slowly.

"Agathe Morhan," Ben nodded. "Tell me, Sophia, how would you decorate this room for a girl with Mal's DNA in her?"

Sophia snorted. "How do you know it'll be a girl?" She asked. "Mal seems like the person to have sons, not daughters."

"And me?" Ben countered. "And I just... have a gut feeling."

"I think you should do a non-gendered approach," Sophia recommended. "I know a place where we can get furniture that matches the crib, if you're planning on keeping it."

"I think we are," Ben agreed. He sighed. "Should I put a bookcase in here for a newborn who won't have any interest in it for the first year or so? Mom and Dad have all the infant toys for Madison that we'll probably just move up here, and we'll need things like lamps and a chair and..." He broke off. Mal was just better at all this creative stuff. It was irony that she was the one who could care less about it all.

"Let's not worry too much about it right now, Ben," Sophia recommended. "You've still got a while, and Mal will be back in March. Let's paint the walls a different color - maybe white so if she's feeling inspired when she returns, she can do her thing to the walls. And I'll put in an order for new furniture."

"I'd rather do it," Ben admitted. "But thank you."

Sophia nodded and knelt down to poke at the frame on the crib, trying to work the mattress off of it. Been closed his eyes and tried to imagine a little kid in here - would they like swords or tea parties? Gowns or suits? Art supplies or chapter books?

He had so many ideas and things he couldn't wait to try with them. If only he could peer into the future like his family Enchantress could. Or if he could meet them right now so he'd know everything they needed him to do to be a good parent.

Would they be calm, or explosive? Would they like leather and metal or soft cloth and elegant designs? Purple hair or blonde? Would she be a daddy's girl or a mommy's girl?

Thinking about it and wondering made him feel a lot lighter than he had in a long, long time.

"Stop," Jack commanded her as they flew across a forest. Mal halted in midair, clutching the mist in her hand tightly. It took her a moment to come down off of her emotional high before she could focus on him.

"What is it?" She asked.

"We're on the bridge between the swampland and Burgess," Jack explained. His shoulders dropped down as if they were heavy laid with a thousand sorrows. "I think I know where the mist is leading us. One of the old entrances to Pitch's lair is over here, but the area has been pillaged."

"Pillaged how?" Mal asked with a frown.

"By a woman known as the Fairy Godmother," Jack said, gripping his way and looking around cautiously.

"She also goes by Dama Fortuna." Jack shrugged. "If that makes things easier for you."

"You called?" A light voice called. Jack's eyes went wide. A bright white stream of light appeared out of nowhere and struck Jack down from the sky. He tumbled, head over heels, to the ground below.

"Jack!" Mal exclaimed. She made to go after him, which moved her frame just enough that when the second stream of light appeared to try and knock her out of the sky, it only took her foot out from under her. She fell into the trees below with an angry black and red mark on her heel. Mal screamed and covered her face as the branches scraped her arms and the needles from evergreen trees stuck to her skin. She tumbled to the ground and laid on the stone-like earth, heaving and shaking. The trees had broken her fall enough that she was only banged up.

She quickly got to her knees and looked around. A woman with grey hair piled atop her head and half-moon spectacles was floating above Mal's head. "Why, you're quite agile." She said, blinking down at Mal.

"Excuse you!" Mal spat out a mouthful of pine sap. Irrational anger boiled in her veins. "Is that any way to treat guests?"

"Guests?" The woman asked. "I think not. Invaders are more accurate."

Mal jumped to her feet as the woman floated towards the ground and marched right up to her with her fists balled and smoke beginning to curl out of her ears. She felt entirely, irrationally, angry. "You want an invasion, Ms. Fortuna? I will give you an invasion!"

"You and what army, dear?" Dama Fortuna, the second Fairy Godmother, quipped. She waved something past Mal's face. Mal focused on it. It was a wand. Interesting.

"You know what, lady?" Mal yelled, advancing further on the Fairy Godmother. "I'm sick, I'm exhausted, and I want this bloody war over with so I can go back to problems that actually keep me entertained for more than two days. Do you want to end up like Eris's daughter? Well, bring it on!"

Mal stamped her foot and crossed her arms. The Fairy Godmother flicked her eyes up and down Mal's frame. "This is the queen of Auradon?" She asked distastefully. "You're the woman that drained Helena of Troy of her magic?" She flicked her wand to the left, and Mal felt her entire body leave the ground. She blew sideways, like a leaf, into a tree. As she collided with the truck, she bit her tongue and spat out a mouthful of blood. Her side was burning.

She felt magic flicker to her rescue at the pain. A cold wave washed over her as the green flames she knew resided under her skin made a barrier around her body so that she could not be harmed. Dama Fortuna flicked her wand to the ground in front of Mal, and Mal shielded her face as the earth blew into the air in front of her. Mal's ears rang as the sonic boom of the explosion followed. She felt the wind and dust course around her body, and when it was all over, dusted herself off. She'd slid back about thirty feet and would have hit trees had they not been blown away as well. She let the green light come into her eyes and looked ahead, towards where she'd last seen the Fairy Godmother. Dama Fortuna appeared in front of Mal from the clouds of dust still rising. She frowned as she examined the long tracks which led up to Mal's feet.

Mal held out her hand. "And now I command, wand to my hand." She recited firmly. The wand immediately lurched to try and follow Mal's command. Dama Fortuna gasped and fastened her hold on her wand. She held it back for three whole seconds before she and the wand jumped to obey the
Queen of the Moors. The Fairy Godmother was dragged forward on her face in the ground until the handle of the wand landed in Mal's hand.

"No!" Dama Fortuna wailed. She wrapped her legs around Mal's outstretched hand and began to childishly kick to pull her wand from Mal's grasp. Mal felt for the green fire underneath her skin and, without even looking into the second realm, began to pump magic into it. Dama Fortuna continued to scream, unaware that Mal was destroying her wand underneath her very fingertips.

"Mal!" Someone called from the woods. A teenager in a blue hoodie came limping out of the woods with his staff slung over his shoulder. "Mal!" He yelled.

Mal turned her emerald gaze on Jack and snapped: "Freeze her before I blow her to pieces."

Jack was wounded, but he flew the last twenty paces to Mal and readied his staff. Dama Fortuna's eyes widened. "Noo!" She screeched. Jack swung, and thick ice appeared over Fortuna's skin. Mal yanked the wand out of her fingers, and Jack froze her over a second time for good measure. He then collapsed on the ground next to her.

Mal examined the wand. It looked pretty pathetic. It was simple, silver, with a wider base than tip if you didn't count the star on the top. It almost looked like an extremely thin Christmas Tree with a very large star atop. Mal snorted and snapped the star clean off the top of the wand, dropping it as sparks flew out. She held the wand aloft and pushed as much magic as she could to her fingertips. She watched as green light appeared in her hand. The wand began to morph and change. It expanded in her grip to a wider ivory grip with a holster attached to the end. Beautiful purples and blues imprinted in the sides of the wand, and tiny engravings of gold appeared around the clutch of the wand. Mal smiled upon her work. "Nice." She commented.

She picked up the tip, the star, which had fallen to the earth, and dusted it off on her shirt. She brushed it off on her shirt and examined it. It still radiated with power. Mal suddenly had a wonderful idea, so she slipped the star into a pocket of her armor and placed the wand in her boot. She kicked the ice block containing the old woman. "Exactly how much can you freeze her?" She asked. "I want to send her to the Isle, but I don't have time to find Bunny when we're so close to Pitch."

"Give me a minute." Jack groaned. Mal bent down and rested her hands on the angry black and red marks on his neck. "Be whole of soul; as bright as gold." She muttered. Jack let out a breath of relief as the red withdrew. He moved his shoulder and legs carefully to test them out.

"Where'd she get you?" Mal asked.

"Across the back." Jack sighed. "I'll freeze her over and we'll go."

Mal stepped back as Jack took to the air and watched as he lit the tip of his staff up and began to coat the second Fairy Godmother with layer after layer of ice. Mal sat down and checked her ankle, where Dama Fortuna had managed to nick her, but it had already healed at some point since her fall.

When Jack had finished encasing the older woman, he sat beside her on the earth and conjured a handful of snow. He handed it to her carefully.

"What is this?" Mal asked as she took it with both hands.

"You threw up, got blasted from the sky, and then built a new magical device." Jack sighed. "Ben will be mad at me if I don't at least make sure you're getting enough water."
Mal snorted. "Yeah. I got blown into a tree before she tried to blow me up." She rolled her eyes. "Ben will probably be thrilled to hear that."

Jack looked unsettled. "Are you okay?" He asked.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. "I'm not bruised or anything." She showed him her arms as proof.

Jack sighed and conjured her a second handful of snow. Mal felt her remaining anger fade as she let the snow melt down her throat. "Okay." She said and stood back up. "I'm ready to go when you are."

Jack still looked worried. "Don't overdo yourself." He warned.

Mal waved off his worries. "I'm fine." She sighed. "Just don't expect me to act kindly to her again." She gave the Fairy Godmother's dome of ice one last annoyed kick before she stretched her wings and took to the sky. Jack followed, riding the winds with his staff. "Lead the way." She told him.

She followed Jack through the maze of endless trees. Mal watched as the air grew visibly thick with soot and rainbow smog. "It's from them brewing potions here," Jack told her sadly. They flew lower to the ground to avoid the worst of it. One day, she'd have to bring the moorlanders to help her correct the pollution.

Jack lead her past a small pond with enchanting frost patterns covering the surface of the thick ice. They darted around a tree with a giant knot that seemed the perfect size for someone small to rest inside, but radiated sadness like Mal hadn't felt in a long time. Finally, they came across an area where the trees didn't grow and the ground was hard as a rock. Jack and Mal landed beside a large hole. When Mal peered in to find the bottom of it, she found that there was no bottom visible.

"Pitch Black is down there?" She asked.

"Yeah." Jack nodded.

Mal frowned. "Well, we can't go in. That's a death trap."

"How else do you expect to get him?" Jack asked with a frown.

Mal picked up a handful of the earth and dropped it into the hole. She couldn't hear anything. It was complete darkness down there. "Could we smoke him out?" She asked.

"Pitch? The shadow king who has both sand and shadow travel powers? Sure, we can try." Jack rolled his eyes.

Mal pinched her lips together and her chest twanged in hurt. "Don't you do that!" She snapped, crossing her arms as stubborn tears appeared in her eyes. "You know what? Fine, let's do it your way!" She put one hand on either side of the hole and dived in.

"No, wait!" Jack yelled, but she was already gone, falling down the not-so-wonderland hole. She knew immediately it was a bad idea, and cursed her stupid mood swings for everything they had made her do in the last twenty minutes alone.

Mal skidded out of the dirt and fell forward onto her hands and her knees on the cement blocks of the floor. She swore and stood up, brushing off her hands and armor.

The room appeared to have once been part of a grand castle that had sunken into the ground at a
bad angle. A name came to Mal's head for the cursed place: Onihah. Large chandeliers that looked more like cages hung from the ceiling and several dangerous-looking arches that were meant to be walked on stretched around the room like a cross between bridges and tightropes. Mal was standing on an area of the structure that dropped immediately into a large cliff off the side. Mal stepped up to the edge and peered over into the depths of the room. Once again, she saw no end, only spiraling darkness.

"Care to introduce yourself?" A hard voice echoed off the walls. Mal heard a sound almost like a breath and turned to see a very tall man with broad shoulders, dark grey skin, and a square face sneering at her.

"Nah." Mal rolled her eyes. "You'd probably hate me more if I did." She crossed her arms, completely unimpressed with the nightmare king. He looked equally unimpressed with her.

"Purple hair, green eyes, and horns," He chuckled as he took a seat on a rather large stone block that looked like it had fallen from the ceiling. "Don't you look like a fashion statement?"

"Thank you." Mal bowed sarcastically. "The tabloids love me. And I'd love to chat more, but I've really got to get around to shutting up the ol' sandbox if you don't mind." She snorted and began to laugh. "Oh sandbox. Geesh, I should reuse that one when I go to cage Eris."

"Cage Eris?" Pitch asked. He disappeared into sand and reappeared in front of Mal. "You think yourself so great as to cage a goddess of chaos?"

Mal shrugged and pushed past him. She began to walk across one of the walkways. They looked like flying buttresses. She looked down into the dark as she walked and was unpleasantly surprised to see that white eyes were staring up at her.

"Like them?" Pitch asked. His voice was disembodied and coming from every corner of the room. "They were my companions in the dark ages."

Mal gave a lazy double-thumbs up. "You got a bathroom anywhere?" She asked as she wandered into what looked like a gigantic dining room, complete with an abnormally-sized table. It was engraved with scenes of panic, plague, and war. This she leaned on as she turned to talk to Pitch.

Pitch looked genuinely surprised by that request. "Why would I, an immortal lord of darkness, have a bathroom in his palace?"

"I'm guessing that's a no." Mal sighed. "You should get one. In case, you know, you have any other purple-haired, pregnant queens that come and need to use the services."

Pitch chuckled. "Somehow, I doubt after you, that that will ever happen again." Sands began to coil at his feet. From them, he pulled a sword made of shadows.

Mal rolled her eyes. 'Sorry, I think I left my sword upstairs. Mind if I go get it?' She pointed in the general direction of the surface.

Pitch looked at her curiously. "You are not afraid of heights, of demons, or of people pulling swords on you. What then, pray I ask, do you fear?"

Mal yawned. "Nothing you have to offer." She told the nightmare king. "I must say, your daughter was a lot like you before I scared her half-to-death." Pitch's eyes flashed in anger. "She thought she could beat me too." Mal smiled lazily.

"Listen, little girl," Pitch narrowed his eyes and glared down at her. "You're talking to a god. I don't
Mal pursed her lips a little in defense. She didn't think there was anything that gave her age away in particular - it must just be her height.

"Perhaps losing your child?" Pitch asked. Images flooded Mal's mind. She imagined lowering a small coffin into the ground, saw herself dressed in black. She felt cold wind nipping at her heels and saw the shadow king cross the ground nearby. The images faded, and she saw Pitch smiling wickedly at her from across the room.

"Not really," Mal admitted as she shook her head. "That'd suck, maybe, but I'm not afraid of it."

Pitch's smile faded considerably. He disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the room. Mal sighed. She didn't understand what was with sand magicals and their appearing every which way. Hopefully Ben never picked up the habit. "What about… losing the war?" He smirked. More images flew behind Mal's eyes. Jack and Hiccup and everyone dead, death spreading to Auradon, black sands moving across the ocean…


"Eris's sands can't touch water, or they become useless. And yours are flammable. They'd be easy to stop. And if we lose the war, we'll just let everyone take refuge in Auradon. I fixed things, so you can't go over anymore." Mal smiled widely at Pitch.

"We'll find a way." Pitch smiled.

Mal rolled her eyes. "Okay, hotshot." She lowered her eyes into the second realm and began searching for the slippery traces of Pitch's magic that she'd followed here as Pitch continued to make guesswork of her.

"Auradon falling into ruin." He chanted. She forced the images away after glimpsing the ruined Beast's Castle.

"In your dreams." She returned.

"Becoming a failure." He challenged. She glimpsed the image of North and Sandy looked disappointedly at her and scoffed.

"I was raised being told I was a disappointment to my mother. You'll have to do better than that." Mal insisted. Pitch didn't seem to even notice she was toying with his magic. Oh well, make it easy on her.

"Let's see here, let's see here." Pitch snapped his fingers. "Living without your husband because he died?"

Those words immediately brought back fresh, painful memories. Mal flinched and lost her focus as visions of Ben with black sand pouring in a grotesque manner out of his mouth and eyes sprinted past her eyelids. Fear froze its way into her spine.

Pitch laughed. "There we go!" He crooned. Mal did her best to ignore him as she returned to work, but her focus was dramatically impaired. The room around her seemed to disappear as Pitch melted into the shadows and visions were thrown at her in a powerful, dizzying pace. She tried her best to find his presence, but with the full-color visions being thrown in front of her, morphing the room as she worked, it was impossible to grasp anything. She wasn't powerful enough to interfere with Pitch's natural magic.
"Can you imagine putting him into the ground?" Pitch laughed as he pulled from her memories a frantic Ben, waking her with a new type of skin on his chin, and shaking as sand poured from his fingers. His voice was demented, and Pitch echoed whenever he spoke. "Look what you did to me!" He howled. "How could you do this? I'd rather be dead!"

A gunshot echoed inside Mal's head as she watched him drop to the ground, banging his head on the bathroom counter with a self-inflicted gun wound. She clapped her hands over her ears and screamed. Belle and Adam appeared in the doorway to her imagined room and stared in horror.

"Did you do this?" Belle asked, with Pitch's voice repeating every word. "Was this your plan all along?" Adam growled, rising up to his full height and lunging forward, seizing her throat. "Wait until you had a grasp of the palace and… murder him!"

He lifted her up off the ground and shook her as if he were presenting her for all the world to see. "Assemble a firing squad!" He howled. "I want her executed within the next hour!"

Mal looked down at the fuzzy appearance of Belle, but she said naught a word. Beautiful pearlescent tears fell from her eyes as she stroked her dead son's hair, carefully avoiding the place where blood poured out of his head in a sickening manner.

The vision released her, and Mal fell to the floor of the dining room, crying. Pitch Black appeared, half-materialized from the shadows, and laughed cruelly. "What else are you afraid of, Queen of Auradon?" He asked with mirth in his eyes. "Could it be… losing your magic?" Several painful images appeared with his words. Mal trying and failing to cast off shackles on her wrists in a dark cell, watching Ben writhe and turn the night he'd almost died with no chance of saving him, and watching Maleficent the Senior roll her eyes and hiss: "Weak, overemotional."

Pitch continued pulling at her strings until finally he found something else that made her double over. Ben, staring at her in shock, while her hands curled around her frame - a frame that was much more pronounced than her real one. It was a figure she'd only conjured up in tortured thoughts. "You don't want it?" Ben gasped. "Now?"

"I. Can't. Do. This." Mal heard herself grit her teeth together. "I want it gone." He closed his eyes in pain and turned away from her.

"I am not afraid of you." She whispered to Pitch. Her stomach was churning again from being thrown to the floor.

Pitch laughed and came further out of the shadows. He floated in front of her, about five feet away. "Jack Frost said that to me once." He remembered. "And I told him that he was afraid of something." Pitch paused to spread his arms. "And he was. He was afraid that no one would ever believe in him, that he'd be doomed to be invisible and friendless for the rest of eternity. And that he'd never know why. Without his memories for three hundred years, wanting desperately to know who he was, not knowing all that time that Toothiana, the guardian of memories, had the teeth that every child had lost over the last few millennia and that she had the power to tell him who he was."

Mal knew the situation the moment it started. The monologue, where the villain uncannily explained his evil plan and evil motives while giving the hero enough time to formulate an unlikely plan that works. Unfortunately, Mal was a mite too sick to think of anything right now. She curled up on her knees with her forehead pressed into the ground as Pitch continued to croon.

"I lured him here, with those memories of his that I had stolen. Tossed him around in his own fears, and then tossed him out in the cold. I find it fascinating that the very girl I was conspiring to kill happened to wander into my palace just when I was… trying to figure out where to find you." Pitch
trailed off and snapped his attention back to Mal. "How did you find this place?"

Mal held up a finger and shook it at Pitch as she squeezed her arms to her stomach. Several seconds passed. "How did you find-" He started again, but Mal thrust her finger at him more urgently and shook her hand at him. He cocked his head sideways at her. "Are you… okay?" He asked.

Mal felt her stomach rush up her esophagus and shuddered. She gagged once and emptied the contents of her stomach, most of which was water and bile, all over the floor of the dining room. Pitch jumped back in shock. Mal groaned pitifully as she held her hands against her stomach, and felt bile rise up inside her a second time. She groaned and rolled away from the foul-smelling liquids. She squeezed both of her thumbs, which was a trick she'd learned on the Isle that lessened your gag reflex, and took several small, deep breaths. The churning in her stomach gradually lessened, and she carefully got to her feet.

"You-you just threw up all over my dining room." Pitch said, sounding shocked.

Mal wiped her mouth on the back of her arm. "Maybe you should consider installing a bathroom." She told him.

Pitch shook his head a few times to get his bearings. "How… how did you get here again?"

Mal smirked. She kept one hand to her stomach as her insides churned and steadied herself on the table with her other hand. "I'm a lot more powerful than you think." She smiled.

Pitch frowned. "As am I." He told her. "You can't destroy me, you know. I am fear. Fear will always exist. You can't kill fear, your highness."

Mal pinched her lips together in a tight smile. "Who?" She asked.

"Fear." Pitch gestured broadly to the room around them with a proud smile.

"No, who were you talking to?" Mal asked.

"You." Pitch frowned.

"Me?" Mal asked innocently.

"The Queen." Pitch spat in the most impressive sarcastic tone she'd heard from anyone in a very long time.

Mal pulled the star that had come off Dama Fortuna's wand out of her pocket and tossed it in her hand. "Ah, the Queen. That's me. I never understood this use of the word 'highness'. I mean, look at how tall I am." She chuckled and slipped the star back into her pocket. She had no use of it. "I'm not just a queen, Pitch. I'm an enchantress."

A storm arose in Pitch's eyes. "An enchantress? Hardly. My daughter was an enchantress. A goddess by right of her mother. Do you know what you've done? You destroyed the goddess of deceit."


Black sands arose behind Pitch's frame as he grew angrier and angrier. "I will destroy you." He hissed. "I will imprison you just as you imprisoned Apate!" The yell echoed off the walls. Mal cocked her head. She found it fascinating how Pitch referred to his daughter as Apate, while most
people tended to say: "Helena of Troy", as Dama Fortuna had. Only Helena had referred to herself with both names. Pitch tried to lunge forward, but a sudden layer of ice held him in place. Mal looked around Pitch and found a tall, white-haired man in a battle position with his shepherd's crook outstretched.

Jack Frost.

Pitch's expression hardened. "Frost." He spat. "So we meet again."

Jack smiled sadly. "Well, it's as you said, isn't it?" He whispered. "What goes better together – or head to head – than cold and dark?"

Mal lowered her gaze into the second realm and reached out for Pitch's magic as he and Jack stared each other down. His feet were still immersed in shadows. She worked quickly, stealing partially from Jack's ice magic in his staff, and sealed the shadows at Pitch's ankles. She continued, working fast, and encased Pitch in a spell the likes of which she'd never cast before. It was like a shield around the entirety of his body, with inter-weavings of ice and her fire magic around it. She made careful not to prod Pitch's magic in any way, and he did not appear to notice what was going on. Within thirty seconds, she was done with the frame-working of the spell.

"So, this is how you found my palace," Pitch growled. "Fear not, I shall have him with you."

Mal connected her spells and fail-safes to Pitch and returned her vision to normality. This, Pitch felt. He clutched at his chest and coughed lightly. Mal knew that the spells were powering off of his own strength, and thus they would stay unless they were broken.

Pitch turned towards her as he bent over, his chest tightening. "Did you do this?" He asked in wonder.

"Now, Jack." Mal nodded at her white-haired counterpart.

Pitch's eyes widened in fear. He turned and commanded the black sands around him, but they did not respond. Rather, Pitch yelled in pain at the sharp tug at his chest. He tried to fade into the shadows but looked like he was bouncing lightly as he waited to fade into his metaphysical form. He stared at Mal in shock. In all this time, Jack had remained tense but had not moved. Pitch could not run. He could not move. His feet were in a different plane, and he was trapped. Mal crossed her arms. "What's wrong? You seem... sad without your powers."

"You can't get rid of me!" He sputtered as Jack and Mal advanced on him. "It is as I said, there will always be fear!"

Mal smiled as she examined her handiwork. "Lovely words, Pitch. Jack?" She elbowed her partner. "What do you say we take him to the Isle, and chain him to the top of the forbidden mountain?"

Jack raised an eyebrow. "I don't know where that is." He reminded her.

"Oh, famous place," Mal smiled. "My mother once resided there. He'll have a lovely view of the Isle and Auradon. And above all, it'll be a wonderful place for him to watch things change forever, without end."

Pitch's eyes grew wide with fear. Jack tapped him with his staff, and a thick layer of ice formed around his frame. Mal smiled as she took how of one of Pitch's arms, and Jack took hold of the other.

"Think the war council can handle one goddess of discord for a week or so?" Mal asked Jack as
they pulled Pitch out of the room and began to head back to the way they'd come in.

"Are you heading out?" Jack asked.

"And you're coming with me." Mal raised an eyebrow. "We've got one guardian of fear to chain to a horrendous mountain for time and all eternity, one Ice Queen and two Ice Princesses to see, and I am going to drop by and see my husband and my people on the Isle before we return."


As they ascended into the sky and began to head back, a thought occurred to Mal. "We should stop by the moors before we go to see Elsa." She said. "I just remembered I need to pick something up."

Chapter End Notes

Her dragon skin seemed to protect her from the heat and her busted arm didn't seem to translate over into this form, but Eris's nails were ripping off scales and it was hard to move as glass stuck to her in huge sheets.

Eris slammed her elbow down on her head. Mal shook off the blow and blew fire into Eris's face. Eris broke away and used her legs to send Mal tumbling back over the sands once again. Mal got back, up, prepared to go back to battle, and stumbled. The world around her suddenly got a lot bigger and warmer. She looked down and realized her hands were back. She'd inadvertently reverted back to her human form. The sands she'd tumbled across were bright, vibrant green with magical staining. She was out of magic. She couldn't maintain that form anymore.

Mal ran her good hand across her head. Her horns, which had been irretactable the last few weeks, had finally vanished as her body tried to conserve magic. She'd never used this much magic before, and now she was almost out.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Mal gives Fairy Godmother a new wand, Jane a magical concentrator, Ericka a staff, Ella a daughter, Anastasia a husband, and Ben a pep talk.

Chapter Notes

What do you mean we only have two more weeks of this?

Pitch Black started to thaw as they caught up to Bunnymund, who opened a tunnel with Mal’s permission to the Isle of the Lost for her and Jack to fall through before he bounded off to find Dama Fortuna. They appeared on the highest point of the Isle of the Lost – the Forbidden Mountain. It was home to Maleficent’s old, crumbling palace, and Mal had only been there once.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Jack hissed, glancing around. Mal hummed and pulled Pitch through the crumbling entrance. What had once been a formidable fortress was now a teetering trash heap, but no less imposing. The roof had long since caved in, scattering dust and wreckage across a rough stone floor. Mal could see brown stains across the floor underneath her. She wanted to believe it was rust stains but knew the chances of it being long-dried blood were not only possible, but significantly high. This point on the Isle rose above the majority of the clouds, and thus didn’t get any rain. Various ragged and ripped tapestries hung from the moldy walls. Mal could see the remnants of someone being gutted in one. Once upon a time, it had fascinated little her. Back when her entire life story had been to be Maleficent.

Jack followed along slowly, coughing and choking. Mal knew to breathe slowly and deep. She was already going light-headed from the lack of oxygen. She went to the old throne where Maleficent had once sat – where she had once sat, pretending to be her mother – and then set pitch atop it. The armrests crumbled under the weight of the ice, but the stone base of the chair held steady. Bit by bit, she unfroze Pitch’s legs and used the old prisoner chains to bind him to the chair. Then, she did the same to his arms, melting the ice up to his wrists so she could bind him.

“These won’t hold,” She told Jack. “And they’re iron – my magic won’t work on them. Mom always used iron as, like, a symbolism. That was what Auroria used when fighting against the moorlands.”

“So, this was your mom’s place?” Jack coughed, sputtering in between breaths. “You grew up here?”

“No,” Mal shook her head. “The pollution set in too fast and it became inhabitable before I was born. I grew up in the Dragon Hall on the Isle. But I traveled here once, looking for her scepter.” She gave the chains a shake to find the weaknesses and then looked to Jack. “Freeze these over,” She commanded. “It’s too cold for ice to melt up here. Freeze it over, and I’ll reinforce the ice. It’ll hold him off for a few thousand years, and then whoever is in charge of the Isle can deal with him then. I’ll unfreeze him so he can move a little.”
Jack nodded, bending down to poke at the chains. Glittering frost ran up the course of them, and Jack fell over coughing. His hands hit the rubble of the old roof as Mal picked up the frigid chains and gave them a shake. She poured her magic out through her fingertips into the links and watched the entire chain light up under her prompting. Then, she walked over, and carefully began to melt Pitch Black down.

“What is this?” Jack asked in a shaky tone. Mal turned and glanced up as he brushed the rubble aside and uncovered something that resembled hardened yellow-white clay. Pitch Black took a gasping breath in front of her.

“Bones,” Mal responded needlessly and Jack, despite his asphyxiation, jumped back. “They’re from the old people my mom used to torture before she moved bases to Dragon Hall.”

Jack blinked as Mal continued unfreezing the unconscious Pitch Black. His head dropped to his shoulders and then his back slumped into the chair before his legs splayed out in the chair. The nightmare king now sat unconscious on the throne of the Evilest of them all.

“Come on, Jack,” Mal called, heading towards the doors. At the sound of her voice, Pitch stirred.

“You grew up with this?” Jack gasped, flitting after her. “With the air and the-“

“The air is worse up here,” Mal replied. “Thin too. It’ll get better as we go.”

“And the bones?” Jack gestured behind him with a frantic wave. “Your mother sounds insane.”

Mal scuffed her feet on the ground at the edge of the mountain. Behind them, the castle shook as someone began to yell and holler. Jack jumped. Mal stretched out her wings and took to the air. Jack wasted no time in following her, though he had a significantly harder time navigating the air as they headed down the mountain. Soon enough, they could see the foggy outline of the city, and the air became much more manageable. Jack turned to see the towering mountain fading into the smog and distance before they passed through the barrier and into the sunshine and crisp light of the utopia.

“How did you manage to get up there?” Jack asked, catching up with her easily as clean air filled his lungs. “It’s practically all slope.”

“It is,” Mal affirmed. “And there’s cliffs and things. I wasn’t alone though – my friends went with me. It took a few months. I was trying to prove myself to my mom.”

Prove what?” Jack asked.

Mal shrugged. “Prove I could be her. I used to do it a lot. It was my mission in life to become Maleficent.” She nodded in the direction of the invisible mountain. “The things she did up there, she brought to the Isle. I know it’s shocking for you, and it’d probably be shocking for everyone – even Ben – if I showed them, but I grew up alongside her evil schemes. Sometimes, it was even my chore or privilege to participate.”

Mal brushed her hands against her sides as Jack stared, openmouthed, at her. She knew she had blood on her hands and things she might have to account for when she died. There had been a very real reason everyone had feared and hated her. A very real reason why Uma had refused to work with her. And it was scary to think of where she was now, consider the path she’d been on, and realize that she could have very well brought all of that misery to Auradon.

A cry went up from the citizens on the Isle, and people called her name as she and Jack took off back over the Auradon Bay. Instead of splitting off though, Mal pointed towards the far west, and
they followed the shoreline for several miles before the Auradon border ended and Mal could see the shimmering white barrier of the Magical Moorlands.

“Would you like to see where all magic comes from?” She whispered. Jack jumped at the sound of her voice, and then nodded slowly.

They passed through the barrier and approached the ground at an astounding rate. Mal had visited about forty percent of the moorlands now and knew many of the people there now. Everywhere new she went, people knew who she was, though she had yet to meet them. Before she’d even hit the ground, a group of people had gathered to welcome her.

“Queen Mal!” They cheered, and the familiar language washed over Mal like some sort of calming wave. She smiled.

“Hello!” She cheered and glanced over at Jack. His face twisted at her sudden change of language. “I need to find a smith to forge something for me – hopefully as quickly as possible. Can you help me?”

“The nearest one would be Willowly,” a troll with skin like an insect’s wings directed her. “He works with wood, though. Not metal or gems. Would that do?”

Mal hummed, sparing Jack a cautious look. “I believe wood would be best actually. Where can I find him?”

Four small creatures with little thorns for fingers and pebbles strewn across plant-like skin seized her fingers and began to lead her away. Mal turned to see if Jack was following her and ran her nose into a pixie that was chattering excitedly in her ear. “Sorry,” she apologized as they began tugging lightly at her hair. “Yes, I’m very excited to see you too.”

They led her through the woodlands until suddenly the ground turned into a paved pathway with polished stones lining the way. Mal wasn’t surprised as they came across a little wooden house – places like this existed in the moorlands, where creatures preferred to live under flat rooves where they could spend the evenings sleeping on top of their dwellings under the stars while having their own private little spaces. She’d been a bit surprised at first to discover a moorland home, but then learned there simply weren’t any around Auroria because they’d all been destroyed or moved.

Mal stamped her feet on the doormat and heard something click behind the door. “One moment!” Someone called inside, and then the door opened. A man with two identical heads and a long stump where a third might have been peeked out and then gasped and tripped as he rushed to open the door further. “It’s the Queen!” He exclaimed. “Oh, your highness! What an honor it is to finally meet you!”


“I – yes!” Willowly exclaimed, twisting his hands, which had had three of, in a revolving circle in front of him. “I am! I am Willowly! And I – I make things! Staffs and wands and things! I, uh,” He swallowed and visibly calmed himself. “You don’t need anything, do you? I was under the impression you and your mother had similar magic.”

“We do,” Mal nodded. “Rather, I need something for someone else. What can you do for a winter spirit with no control over her powers?”

Willowly looked behind her at Jack, who was still lost, and then looked back at Mal. Jack followed his gaze. “What’s he saying?” He asked Mal in a whisper. Mal waved him off.
“Not for him,” She told Willowly. “Someone similar. Can you help us?”

The smith cleared his throat. “I actually might have something, but we’d want to make a few adjustments for a winter spirit. He beckoned Mal into the house, shoving the door into an automatic latch to prop it open. Inside, various types of trees grew with bindings on them to ensure they grew into different shapes. Mal saw trees with spiraled branches and ones that started thinner and grew thicker, and some in every color imaginable. Vibrant blue woods, rosy pinks, every color imaginable. Willowly ducked under them and headed into the back, where a large boulder rolled aside to reveal a closet filled with many trimmed wooden blanks. Willowly withdrew one made of birch wood that was about an inch shorter than Mal. He threw it at Jack, who fumbled and dropped his own shepherd’s crook to snatch it up. A thin layer of frost coated it as he snatched it, and then Willowly took him back with a tactful eye as Jack bent to retrieve his own staff.

“This will do,” He announced to Mal. “The first time she uses it, it’ll learn her magic and help her control it.”

The staff had grown to twist around itself in a spiral. The top had an eyelet opening about the size of Mal’s palm and the wood was worn smooth down the length of the artifact. Willowly examined the opening with one eye closed – the other three focusing on the grooves – and then turned and closed himself into the closet. Mal heard a sharp thud, and then a very clear vibrating sound from the other side. When Willowly reemerged, the eyelet of the staff had been ground into a perfect circle. Mal assumed he must have some tools in the closet, though it seemed far too small to hold anything other than staffs or coats.

Willowly left his home with Mal still following. Jack hovered behind, gaping at the trees in shock and carefully warning the fairies away from touching him. He didn’t want to freeze any of them accidentally. Willowly wandered through the trees until he found one that was a lemon tree. “See any dead fruits?” He asked Mal, squinting at the swaying fruits.

Mal pointed to one with a hard outside above her head and summoned it into her grasp. “Here,” She offered it to the man.

Willowly smiled and immediately, without a word, returned to his house, straight back into the closet. Again, Mal heard a grinding sound, and then Willowly opened the door and presented the final product – a birch staff with a crystalized lemon in the eyelet near the top. Mal took it with a smile as Jack furrowed his brow. “A staff?” He asked. “Why do you need a staff?”

“It’s not for her,” Willowly advised Jack, speaking English just like the snow spirit had been this whole time. Jack’s mouth dropped open and Willowly and Mal snorted at his reaction.

“I’ll get back to you for compensation,” Mal promised, taking the staff with two hands. “As soon as I’m back in the moorlands from war, I’ll seek you out.”

The smith nodded in understanding, and Mal turned her gaze to Jack. “We need to stop by Auradon Prep,” She told him, “And then we’ll head to Arendelle. This,” she set the staff’s point in the ground, “Will hopefully help Ericka correct her magic. I’ve been meaning to look into something for her.”

Jack looked at the staff warily. It was a very delicate, feminine thing and a little less than Ericka’s height. It’d probably do more than decently, if the principle carried through.

“Let’s go,” Mal decided, and thanked the smith. The crowd that had gathered upon Mal’s arrival had dispersed, and so they left without fanfare or announcement. Mal noticed that the magic of the border was slightly weaker than when she’d last left the Moors. Not nearly as weak as when she’d
first arrived, but still noticeable enough that she wouldn’t be able to stay away for too much longer. Ben would have to be content with the idea she couldn’t stick in Auradon for too long when she returned.

They doubled back around to Auradon Prep. She and Jack landed on the outskirts of the ancient castle. It had originally been built over three hundred years ago but converted into a school when King Adam had ascended the throne. This was where Ben had spent his time before he ascended the throne and became king. Had Mal not also become queen, she would still be here, in her second-to-last year. She’d be the only one of her friends, though, as Jay, Carlos, and Evie were all older than her.

Even though they were of the same age group of all of the students, the fact that Mal wore battle armor, had horns atop her head and wings on her back, and the fact she was, well, *Mal*, made it impossible for them to weave through the student body unseen. The cold wind that followed Jack and the staff Mal carried also alerted the students to their presence. People gave them a wide berth and lined up with cell phones to take photos of the two. Mal knew it wouldn’t be long before word hit the high palace that the queen had returned. Not everyone could see Jack right off the bat, but the more people whispered, the more people pointed to him in awe.

Christmas trees had been put all around campus in dozens of beautiful colors. Mal smiled when she saw a beautiful purple tree underneath a lovely line of golden tinsel that hung in front of the library. Students followed behind Mal in a solemn procession as they traveled through the grounds.

Mal made her way to the Fairy Godmother's office, only to find the woman herself hurrying down the corridor to them. The two bowed to see each other as the Fairy Godmother straightened herself up and caught her breath. "I expect you have an explanation for your visit," She huffed as she righted the sleeves on her dress. "Last I heard you were on your way to the Moors, flying over Darling's Court."

Mal reached into her boot and pulled out the wand she had taken from Dama Fortuna and morphed into a new shape. Fairy Godmother's eyes grew wide and the students who had followed Mal down gasped in surprise. Mal bowed and presented the wand to the Fairy Godmother. "Consider this a gift." Mal smiled. "Thanking you for your help in saving my husband's life."

The students exchanged excited looks and chattered softly. Fairy Godmother pressed a hand to her heart. "I don't know what to say," She whispered as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Test it out," Mal said, straightening up. "It may take some getting used to, but I tried to make it as alike as the spirit of the last one. I took it from a second Fairy Godmother, by name of Dama Fortuna, who had used her magic for evil, and I turned it into this."

Fairy Godmother took the wand with two hands and waved it carefully. A small stream of glitter fell from the tip and dissipated. The purples and greens faded into the structure of the wand and were replaced with a beautiful royal blue. Fairy Godmother pressed a hand to her mouth as tears filled her eyes. "Thank you, dear," She whispered and opened her arms for a hug. Mal accepted and squeezed the older woman with a bright smile.

"I have one other thing," Mal said, digging in a pocket for the star which she'd snapped off the wand. "This came off Dama Fortuna's wand, and I thought of Jane." She offered it to Fairy Godmother. "I don't know what sorts of magic it possesses, but I know it has some. It's a gift for Jane. Have her experiment with it; I'm sure she'll discover what it can do."

Fairy Godmother's tears came thick and fast as she took the star from Mal. "I'll give it to her straight away." She promised. "Are you going to go home, now?"
Mal looked at Jack. "Actually, we're going to pay a quick visit to Elsa, and then I'll go home." She said. Jack shoved his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Fairy Godmother examined the white-haired teen and realization fell into her eyes. She looked at Jack, looked at the students behind her, and put on a tight smile. "Okay." She whispered. "Jack Frost, right? Tell Elsa, Ericka, and Jessie that I said hi."

Jack pulled his hoodie up and hid his face. Mal saluted the Fairy Godmother. "Will do." She promised with a laugh. The two women shook hands, and then Mal turned back towards the crowd of students in the hall. They parted as she began to walk away.

As she passed, the students dipped into bows and curtsies. Mal's cheeks turned bright red as they dropped their heads low and smiled at her. They left the main building and took to the skies once more. The sun was setting when they landed outside of Arendelle's gates. The guard atop the walls rushed to bring them inside. A thick, fresh layer of snow covered the ground inside the courtyards.

As the Chief of Guards led them towards the front doors, Mal caught movement in the upper window of the palace. Something dark blue with white hair. Mal smiled secretly at Jack.

The doors to the palace opened as the Queen herself stepped out. She wore a long, thick blue dress with gems embedded along the bodice. Soft white fur-trimmed the hem, collar, and sleeves of the dress, and a midnight blue cape that looked woven of ice, which it might have been, was draped over her shoulders. Immediately, the Chief Guard halted as Elsa looked over her guests with a bright smile. "Mal," She greeted and then nodded courteously to Jack. "And Jack Frost."

Mal rolled her eyes. "Don't worry. I've already put the pieces together." She whispered as she shook Elsa's hand. "I need to see Ericka, and then I'll be on my way. I have my own beau I need to catch up with."

Surprise flashed through Elsa's eyes, but she did not comment any further. "Of course. I believe she's upstairs."

As Mal passed into the palace, Elsa looked at Jack suspiciously. Jack held up his hands and laughed. "I didn't say anything." He promised.

Kaitlyn, Anna and Kristoff's second daughter, was sliding down the banister in the entryway as a small boy sprinted after her, tripping and sliding down the steps of the stairway. Kaitlyn leaped off the banister and sprinted through Mal and Elsa as the boy picked himself up and ran after her, waving a small sword of ice. "Sorry, Aunt Elsa! Hi Jack!" Kaitlyn yelled as she rushed out of the doors with the little boy hot on her heels.

Elsa sighed. "Sorry. One of the servant's boys. Here, let me show you to Ericka." They began the ascent up the stairs. On a higher level, the royal families and servants bustled in and out of several different rooms. The floor was slick with ice. Some paused to bow to Mal, but most only gave Jack a casual wave and failed to notice her. "Hi, Jack." Someone said, slipping around him with a basket of toys for the nursery. "Sup'Jack." "Excuse me, Jack."

Apparently, the Arendellian palace was in on the Queen’s secret. Mal couldn’t believe that no one had ever let it slip to the outside world.

Princess Anna rushed down the hall suddenly, screaming. She tripped and slid right past Mal and Elsa, down the stairs and into the entryway. Jack held out a hand as she slid down the stairs, and they high-fived. "Hi, Ja-a-a-a-ck!" Anna yelled as she thumped down the stairs.
A large shadow appeared from where Anna had appeared. It was Kristoff, who was soaked to the bone. He rushed to the balcony and shook his fist at Anna as she giggled and ran out the door to freedom. "I'll get you back!" He vowed as he turned and glimpsed their guests. For several seconds, he looked too embarrassed to move. Then he sighed, bowed, and muttered: "Hello, your highness. Sorry, Elsa. Hi Jack."

Jack waved from behind the two queens. Mal just laughed and didn't bother to correct him on his use of 'her highness'. An argument for another day, perhaps. Elsa covered her face in embarrassment and led the laughing teens through the hall and to a very large ornate door, painted white with snowflakes and pine trees painted on the outside. Elsa knocked. "Ericka?" She called. "The Queen of Auradon has come to see you."

The door immediately opened. Ericka slipped out, looking surprised. "Hello," She said. Her hair was braided in the same fashion as Elsa's. She smoothed her dress down and stepped out into the hall. Her eyes lit up when she saw her dad. "Oh, hello, Jack."

Mal finally snorted. "You can call him dad around me if you want. I won't tell anyone." She held the lemon staff out for Ericka. "This is for you." She said.

Ericka's eyes grew large. "What?" She asked. Behind Mal, Elsa’s hands fell to her sides.

"I have a feeling you're more like Jack in your magic," Mal explained. "Here. Try it out." She waited for Ericka to take the staff. Jack rose off the ground with his face frozen in wonder and curiosity. No one said anything as Ericka reached forward and wrapped her fingers around the wooden staff.

Ice spread down the length of the wood the moment she brushed her fingers on it. The frost traveled up and wove around the lemon eye of the staff. Mal smiled. "Looks like I was right." She smiled. "Anyway, lemons! A winter fruit. It comes straight from the moors, which is why the lemon has been crystallized instead of decaying."

Ericka looked enchanted. She tapped the staff on the ground and beautiful frost patterns spread out across the carpet. Elsa gave her a stern look at the blatant misuse of carpeting. "Thank you so much," Ericka whispered as she conjured a snowflake in her palm. "I can't believe how much… easier it is."

"It would be," Mal nodded. "Some people just work easier with staffs. Fairy Godmother can't work without a wand, you know."

Ericka stared at the staff in wonder and then Jumped forward to hug Mal tightly. Mal stiffened, and then hugged her back with a little smile. "Anyways." She sighed, brushing her hair back. "I'll leave you to experiment with your powers. Elsa, Jack, you've got a great girl. I'll show myself out."

Elsa smiled brightly at Mal. "Thank you, Queen Mal." She whispered, and then watched Ericka conjure a flurry in her hand.

Mal waved her off. "Jack, should we try to head back to the overland in like, four days?" She raised an eyebrow for approval.

Jack immediately landed and frowned. "Actually, Mal, we have a problem. Eris has been coming out less and less since you got Helena. Now that we got Dama Fortuna and Pitch, her partner, I doubt she'll come back out. We can go in, but if she closes the barrier, we'll be trapped there forever. Only someone with the same powers as her can go in or out, and we already finished Helena's powers for good."
Mal let out an exhale. Someone with the same powers... the same powers. Immediately, someone came to mind.

Ben was going to be mad.

She gave Jack a smile and a thumb's up. "I have an idea. We'll talk about it later. Bye Jack. Have a nice time with the family." She headed back down the chaotic hallway, dodging past servants who whispered apologies and the two other kids. Abigail and Jessie were rushing around with dolls in superhero costumes. Abigail paused to wave at Mal as Mal hurried down the stairs and out the still-open doors.

Anna of Arendelle, Kristoff, Kaitlyn and her friend all rushed around, laughing and sliding through the fresh snow outside. Poor Kristoff looked half-solid as he shivered in his wet clothes. Mal called upon her wings and took to the skies, leaving all the members of the Arendelle royal family behind.

Snow covered Beast's castle and all of the ground surrounding it. Inside the quiet family room, the fire was blazing up and the tree was decorated, visible from the window. About thirty-odd snowflakes covered the walls and the doors into the family room. Ben stood on the balcony in a warm sweater and black slacks. He was slowly coming back to himself. It was a process, he was finding, and he still refused to use his new powers, but at least he was able to comb his hair away from his eyes in the morning. Baby steps, he told himself. One step at a time. Close your eyes in the shower so you can't see the sand go down the drain. Put gel in your hair so sand doesn't fall out of it. Everything will be okay.

The family room was empty, and the only light came from the tree and the fire. Ben had hauled the projects he was working on all the way from his office to work of them while he stood on the balcony, waiting.

The night grew dark and the skies grew grey. Thick clouds appeared, and the air grew frigid. Ben shivered as he scribbled and wrote. He was still developing the idea of a council to support the crown. Audrey had already taken her idea to her parents, and they were going to start making changes upon the new year.

Ben knew that Mal had returned to Auradon. He'd finally abandoned his phone in his room when new pictures of the Fairy Godmother with her wand had started to blow up the news app. He had no idea that Jane had received what would become known as the Asteri, which could literally project metaphysical thoughts upon the physical world according to the holder's imagination. If Jane could see a box falling off a shelf in her head, it would fall so long as she held the star. It was very complex magic, and it would take a lot of work for Jane to perfect since she had to imagine every single detail of the subject she wished to summon or move - not to mention every motion she wished, or it would glitch out of reality. Eventually she would get to the point she could imagine a flock of birds into and out of existence. He had no idea of the lemon staff Mal had gifted to Ericka and had no idea that Pitch Black had been chained to the top of the forbidden mountains. All he knew was that she'd returned to Auradon and he was hoping she'd come straight to him.

As he drew a line through a bit of script he had written and grumbled under his breath, he heard the beating of wings. He looked up into the clouds with a smile. A fleck of white fell onto his cheek. He studied the outline of the clouds and watched the outline of an angel with horns appear. She gradually took on color until she was before him, descending down onto the balcony with a bright smile. She hovered on the railing and then stepped down onto the platform.

"Fancy seeing you." He breathed as her wings shrank into her shoulders.
"Fancy seeing you." She returned. She stepped forward and his arms went around her. He could see her breath in the air. As the snow fell around them, Mal pressed her mouth to Ben's and his hands went into her hair, where they breezed past the scalp besides her horns and rested at the base of her heavy ivory attachments. Despite her lips being pressed onto his, he couldn't stop smiling. When they withdrew, she put her arms around his neck and whispered: "You didn't think I wouldn't stop by, did you?" She began to kiss his neck where his shoulder met.

He smiled as she drew her tongue and fingers past the sensitive, malformed skin on his neck, taking advantage of the scales, and squeezed her close to him. "Was beginning to wonder." He whispered.

Ben buried his face in her hair, mindful of her horns, as snow fell around them. Eventually he'd have to lead her inside, but for now, things were great as they were.

Mal balanced the phone to her ear as she and Ben laid on the couch together. He laid his head carefully on her stomach as she called Audrey. Mal rolled her eyes. The other end clicked.

"Hello?" Audrey asked.

"Hello, this is Isle Residency District calling on an inquiry of the future of the kingdom of Auroria?" Mal said with a smile.

"You absolute brat! How long have you been in Auradon now? I've literally been waiting two hours for you to call and you went all the way to Arendelle first?" Audrey howled with a smile in her tone. Mal heard something cloth hit the floor on the other end of the line.

"Sorry, had to deliver a few very important items." Mal smiled. "But I'm here now. Ben said you're reorganizing Auroria?" She started combing her fingers through Ben's hair as he skimmed his over her stomach. Mal ignored the churning in her heart as he relaxed.

"Yeah, and I need to talk to you." Audrey let out a breath.

Before she could continue, Mal jumped in. "You want to stay on the Isle." She said.

"Yeah," Audrey admitted, sounding a bit deflated. "But… I don't want to leave my parents behind. Is there any way I can go back and forth just a little bit?"

"We have the ships." Mal shrugged. "or you could get your own boat and I could write you some sort of permit to go through the barrier and back. Whatever you like."

"Are you going to let people move to Auradon then?" Audrey asked.

"You're a special case." Mal objected. "I think I'll handle it case-by-case like I told Ben. Villains can't come over unless they can get someone to vouch for them. Otherwise, week-by-week visitation is the best I'll work for, but I won't do that until the Isle is completely stable, which is happening a lot quicker than I thought it would. The Isle was long overdue for some leadership."


"No problem, Audrey. Are your parents okay with you leaving?" Mal switched the phone to her other ear as her neck was getting a cramp. Ben's eyes drifted closed as he laid on top of her.

"So long as Dad checks out the apartment and I have my knife, they're okay with it. They still haven't grasped the idea that there's literally zero crime on the Isle and everyone is sick of violence." Audrey explained.
"They're worried. I get it." Mal nodded. "Hey, I have one more thing to offer you. I haven't asked Ben about it, but I have a feeling he'll go along with me." At her words, Ben opened one eye and tilted his head to hear her better. "If your kids or even if your grandkids decide they want to come back and live in Auroria, we'll let them move back with the same status you'll hold on the Isle. Just, you know, for the future."

Audrey laughed. "That won't be happening for a long time, Mal. I just want to hang out and go to parties. Have fun! You know?"

"Yeah, I get it." Mal nodded. "Waiting is a good thing to do. But just in case one day you start to worry. Kay?" She parted Ben's hair just above his ear as he wrinkled his nose and closed his eye again. He didn't seem to have any objections.

"Kay, thank you, Mal. For everything. I really mean it this time." Audrey let out a breath of pure, unabashed happiness.

Mal hesitated. She paused in her playing with Ben's hair and then said: "Yeah, no one will ever say I'm not a passionate woman again, huh?" She chuckled, quoting Audrey from what she'd said last Valentine's day.

Ben sat up and gave Mal a scandalized look. Mal held up a hand to stop him saying anything as she heard Audrey take a breath on the other end of the line. "Oh my gosh." She gasped. "You know about that? Oh, this is so embarrassing. I can't believe I did that."

"I was right around the corner when you said it. Followed Ben all the way up to our room and he cried. I'm only bringing it up now because I want you to know we've both made peace with it. Okay?" Mal smiled softly.

"I owe you a serious apology," Audrey said. "That was…"

"Evil?" Mal suggested.

"It was," Audrey whispered.

"Well, don't worry about it anymore. Ben and I have the highest confidence in you, Audrey. You're going to be amazing." Mal promised her.

Audrey exhaled. "I have a lot I need to make up for." She sighed.

"Saving my life wasn't enough?" Mal snorted.

"You saved mine too," Audrey replied.

The smile fell off of Mal's face and she was abruptly sad. Mal sniffled and wiped at her eyes as they filled with tears. "That's really nice, Audrey." She said. "But seriously, don't worry about it. In terms of debts, you've more than made up for everything by helping me with the Isle. Kay?"

Audrey didn't say anything. She only hummed. "I'm going to go and talk to my parents now." She whispered to Mal. "See you later?"

"Yeah." Mal sniffed. "I think I'm going to call Cinderella tomorrow and see if we can take Rob Paulsen to his new home."

"Maybe I can do the same thing at the same time?" Audrey asked. "There's not a lot of things left here that I need." Mal heard something scrape on the other end.
"Maybe I can convince Ben to come down and help me?" Mal raised an eyebrow at her husband, who was still sitting up with a deep frown.

"I think I can manage. As I said, there's barely anything here I use anymore. But he'd be nice company. I want to introduce him to Jarrett."

"You and him, huh?" Mal asked with a smile, remembering the son of Hans and his disastrous attempt at wooing Audrey.

"Sort of?" Audrey trailed off with a giggle.

Mal laughed. "Well. You have fun with that. I'm going to let you go then."

"Bye Mal."

"Bye Audrey."

Mal hung up the phone and put it on the side table. "I can't believe you brought that up to her," Ben scolded her.

"I don't want her to sit on it for the next twenty years. It's easier we forget it all now." Mal answered.

"She probably feels awful." Ben frowned.

"Nope." Mal refuted. "She's happy and laughing. I was just on the phone with her, Ben. You know she doesn't hide her feelings very easily."

"True." Ben subsided. He sighed and laid back down. His hands fell on her midsection protectively, and Mal swallowed.

"You don't have to be so clingy. They're okay," she mumbled, trying to find a place to rest her hands on his shoulders.

Ben curled his ear a little inwards and then slipped a hand inside her shirt to rest on her belly. "I just like knowing that they're there." He whispered, closing his eyes. "I want to protect them."

"They're inside me. Nothing's going to hurt them." Mal sighed. Ben's face crinkled a little, and then he relaxed on top of her frame, cheek against her ribcage as he traced little patterns on her belly.

"Want to come with me to the Isle tomorrow?" Mal asked, running her thumb on top of the groove on his chin, which made him crinkle his nose again like he was about to sneeze.

Ben groaned. "You leave and go. Can't we just… slow down? Take off work? Don't you need a day? I need a day."

Mal laughed. It had been her begging him for a break, once upon a time. "Well, we have a whole day tomorrow. Come on, you haven't gone since you were kidnapped by Uma. Speaking of which, I have to show you her and Harry. They're adorable now that they're not trying to kill me."

"Bringing up me getting captured and then mentioning I'll see the people who ran that escapade is not a great way to convince me, Mal." Ben sighed. He sat up, swung his legs off the couch and sat back. His posture was still sagging, defeated.

"Come on, Ben." Mal rolled her eyes, sitting on her knees and rubbing his shoulder. "You get to be in the sunshine, out of the castle, down in the sand." She paused, then tilted her head. "Has
Cinderella called about Rob Paulsen at all?”

Ben shook his head. “No,” he mumbled. “But Audrey sent a message saying they’d found him and he’d asked to go to the Isle.”

“Well, we could do that tomorrow,” Mal suggested. “And maybe even let Cinderella bring Dizzy back to Auradon. You’d like that.”

Ben was silent. "Okay." He nodded. "I do want to see that."

Mal kissed his head. "Great. Now that you've agreed to one thing, I need to spring something else on you."

"Yeah?" Ben asked. He let his eyes close again as he leaned back into the couch cushion.

"We're not going to be able to defeat Eris without you," Mal told him. Maybe it was a bit harsh to spring the news on him like that, but it was probably best to just get it over with, right?

Ben sat back up. "Meaning…?" He asked slowly.

Mal winced. "We need you to come up with us to Tartarus and help us in the realm of chaos using your sand powers." She admitted.

Ben slumped forward and let his head drop. "I don't want to use them." He sighed. "Using them means that I have to acknowledge I have them."

Not acknowledging powers? Mal frowned. For a king who spent a few months researching what happened to magic-possessing people who didn't use their magic, he should know way better than to do that. Mal swung her legs off the couch and rubbed his back. "I know. But I promise, if you do this for me, I'll find some way to make it up to you." Ben didn't say anything. He just pulled her onto his legs and hugged her frame tight to his.

"Alright." He whispered. "I'll talk to mom and dad. Okay?"

Mal kissed his cheek. "Thank you." She whispered. Ben didn't say anything more. He moved her even closer to him and leaned his head on her shoulders. Mal watched the way he chewed on his cheek and frowned. "You're going to be okay?" She asked.

Ben didn't answer. He turned her head to his and they began kissing as if she hadn't said anything at all. His hands moved carefully at her hips, drawing her even closer. Mal didn't protest much. It had been ages since they'd touched each other like this, and pretty soon she'd have to leave again. So for now, she let his hands slip around on her frame and she let him kiss her and love her, and didn't move when, later on in the evening, he turned his affections to her midsection and began murmuring sweet nothings to someone who couldn't even hear them yet, though bitterness filled her soul.

She had to get over this. She needed to get over this. It wasn't a bad thing, it wasn't anything she couldn't comprehend. She just couldn't understand why it grated at her soul.

Ben was overjoyed. Ben was happy. And Mal should be overjoyed. She liked kids. She liked Madison and Jessie and all the kids on the Isle. But for some reason, she couldn't find any affection for the one child she really should care about - her own.

Ben's breath fell on her shoulder as he started to mess with her outfit, casting the impression he wanted it off. Mal squeezed her arms to her stomach, swallowed the bile rising up her throat, and
turned to meet him face-on.

Mal fell asleep about five minutes after he finished making love to her. Gone were the nights where they'd lie apart, never touching. Gone were the nights he'd lay awake, observing her beauty and wishing she loved him like he loved her. Most nights now, they stayed up talking and falling deeper in love with each other. It was easy - especially on nights like these when she felt open to letting him touch her - to put her to sleep by touching her hair and massaging her scalp until her eyes closed and she drifted away.

That had been several minutes ago. She was facing the window, body bare underneath their sheets, fast asleep with her chest rising and falling like a boat on waves. Ben was combing through her hair and keeping his frame flush against Mal's body, relishing in her warmth. As he traced the bare skin at the hairline behind her ears, he recalled the first nights they'd slept in here, where Mal would eye him distrustfully and there would always be at least two feet of space between them. He liked this a lot better.

Mal sighed a little in her sleep and Ben's heart warmed. God, he loved this woman.

But, granted, love was no excuse for using her to distract himself from his problems. It didn't matter that she was doing the same thing and kissing and touching him to simply try to forget that she was pregnant. Ben knew he couldn't keep using Mal and Mal's mouth and looks and body to forget about the fact he wasn't... human anymore.

Ben exhaled, slumping into his pillows. He kept trying to tell himself that it was better this way - he was alive, with Mal, and their baby was fine, and it was good that he was still around to take care of Auradon. But in truth, he couldn't help wondering if he would be better off dead.

Immediately, guilt wracked his mind. As cruel as it had been to make Mal a teenaged bride to someone of his age and then follow that up by getting her pregnant, it would have been more cruel to leave her a distraught, widowed, single teen mom with three kingdoms to take care of, a war up north, and no confident. He needed to be here. And other people besides Mal would need him. He was pretty sure that the kingdom would riot if Mal suddenly took over. The army needed their leader, and his parents needed their son, and his future son or daughter would need their dad in their lives.

Ben rolled over and draped an arm across his wife's side. Her skin was soft and even though there wasn't any moonlight coming through the window, she was giving off a faint glow. His beautiful magic Isle wife. He ran his fingers down her spine and then wrapped his arms around her, jostling her frame a tad as he did. Carefully, he laid his hands out on her belly, feeling for any nonexistent swelling. Mal hated this when she was awake, so he relished it while she was asleep and mostly dead to the world. Even in her sleep, her face twisted in minor discomfort. Ben exhaled as he watched her wrinkle her forehead. He sighed and buried his nose into her bare shoulder. Every inch of her skin felt like an extension of himself.

"Beautiful, beautiful girl," Ben mumbled, running his knuckles up and down her stomach. It was twisted irony that he loved touching her stomach, knowing their child was underneath her skin, infinitely more than she did despite the fact it was her body. Ben pressed three gentle kisses down her neck and then closed his eyes to relish in her presence. Her scent, wrapping him up, her hair, pressed against his cheek, and her body, feeling perfect against his.

"We're pretty messed up," He whispered in her ear. "You don't want our baby and I wish I had died." Tears pricked his eyes as he pressed Mal against him. "What are we going to do, sweetheart?"
Mal called Queen Ella early that morning, and she met them on the docks with Rob Paulsen in tow. Mal was filled in on the details as they headed onto the ship. They weren’t pretty – Rob had been chased out of his home by villagers who were angry he continued to attack the idea of the Isle of the Lost. His business deeds and home had been confiscated and pawned through some barely-legal measures that Cinderella would have to look into by herself. When Rob had tried to journey to the palace for help, robbers on the road had taken the last of his possessions and forced him back into the village. Rob had dwelt under a bridge, arranging bouquets and selling these, and developing a deep disgust of everything Auradon. Now, he was ready to leave it all behind.

Rob was a very large man with broad shoulders and bright blonde hair. He was about twice Mal's size. He wore a tan shirt and blue cloth pants, held a clean white apron underneath his arm, and a handmade bouquet in his hands. Other than that, he was coming to the Isle completely empty-handed.

Audrey arrived second to the docks with her parents in tow. She had a large suitcase, similar to Ben's travel case that Mal had completely forgotten to bring back from the Overland, and was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, thick pants, and boots. Aurora and Phillip were dressed a little more preppily, but this was their first trip to the Isle. They didn't know what to expect. Mal shook both of their hands and led her little group up the gangplank.

Jarrett was waiting when the ship docked. As Audrey came down the gangplank with her suitcase, his whole face lit up. He jumped into the air and waved to make sure she'd see him. "You did it?" He asked excitedly. "You're really going to stay here?"

Audrey laughed and gave him a gigantic hug. He squeezed her tightly, then took her face as if he was about to kiss her. He didn't though, because Audrey took his hand and turned him around. "Jarrett, this is my mom and dad, the king and queen of Auroria."

Jarrett's joyful expression subsided somewhat, but he outstretched a hand to shake King Phillips. "Pleased to meet you." He greeted the king. "I swear, if you let your daughter stay, I'll knock out anyone who tries to hurt her."

Audrey rolled her eyes. "I can look out for myself." She said primly. "Mom, dad, Jarrett is a son of Hans. He lives in building four."

"Where do you live?" Aurora asked with a smile. She was taking this a lot better than Phillip was.

"Building three. I have an apartment on the top floor." Audrey turned to Queen Ella. "Anastasia and Dizzy are just below me, actually. Let's all head there now." She took Jarrett's hand and wheeled her suitcase behind her as she walked. Ben held out his arm for Mal. She took it with a graceful smile. Queen Ella and Rob walked alone, her fidgeting with her hands and looking around at all the small buildings, and he carefully rearranging the flowers he was holding.

As they passed into building three, Harry Hook and Uma walked out. Ben's mouth dropped open. "Harry, Uma!" He exclaimed. The two former pirates looked up at his unfamiliar voice.

"Oh, hey… fella?" Uma trailed off uncertainly. She looked good. Her hair was even brighter, with bold white streaks and even hints of yellow here and there. Harry had matching white streaks in his bangs. The two were clean, dressed in warm, matching brown sweaters, and wearing leather moccasins. Harry's hook was missing.

"Sorry, you don't remember me, right?" Ben quickly amended. "I'm Ben." He gestured to Mal. "Mal's husband."
At Mal's name, Harry's eyes lit up. "Mal!" He exclaimed. "Is Audrey with you as well?" He asked.

"Audrey's behind you." Mal pointed behind his shoulder. "You two were so busy talking to each other you walked past her." Harry looked over his shoulder and waved to Audrey with a smile.

"Aye." Harry nodded. "It's easy to miss the world going by when you're looking at yours." He said, staring at Uma.

Uma's cheeks turned red. "Well, hopefully, you can use that excuse when you're suddenly an old man, Harry."

Harry took Uma's hands. It was odd to see Harry without his telltale hook. "You make me feel young." He whispered. Uma squeaked in response.

"You guys are cute." Mal raised an eyebrow.

Harry smiled at Mal. "Aye, she is." He crooned, running a hand through Uma's hair. "Thank you, Mal. You were right. I love her a lot."

Uma covered her face with her hands to hide her blush.

"Do you still have your paper, Harry?" Mal asked, thinking back to Harry’s venomous hate of her.


"Along with your hook?" Mal asked. "I'd hate for you to lose it. You loved it so much back when you were on the Lower part of the Isle."

Harry nodded. "Up in the closet." He said carelessly. "I check on them every day."

"Have you gotten them recorded?" Audrey suggested. "You should do that in case they get lost or stolen."

"Aye." Harry nodded. "All is well." He took Uma's hand again.

"All is well." Uma agreed. She turned to Mal. "I have so much to thank you for Mal. Whatever you helped me forget, it must have been really bad."

Mal jumped back as if she'd been slapped. "Oh, um, don't thank me actually. Some of it was actually my fault, and this is my way of apologizing. I hope things are a lot better for you than they were."

"I'm sure they are." Uma smiled. "Everyone we've talked to has said that the Isle was horrible. And lately more people have been coming up to the gates, and they look like they need help. Are you going to let them in?"

"I'm working on something for them." Mal nodded. "It's just been a bit… busy with the war and everything."

"I understand," Uma smiled. "Well, it was nice talking to you, but Harry and I are going to head out now. We have a maths class we'll be late for if we don't hurry."

"Have… fun." Mal waved as Uma and Harry went off, with their hands swinging in between them. Mal shook her head. "It's still so bizarre to have them… like me." She admitted.

Ben nodded. "That was a bit disorienting." He agreed.
"I hope Harry doesn't hate me to pieces when he gets his memories back," Mal whispered.

Ben rubbed her hands. "I'm sure everything will be fine." He whispered. Mal smiled at him.

Audrey started to continue on to the building, and everyone followed her.

By the third floor, Ella, Ben, Aurora, and Phillip were huffing and puffing from all the stairs. Ben had a proper excuse since he was still recovering from almost dying at the beginning of November, but Ella, Aurora, and Phillip weren't used to all the stairs so close together. Mal and Audrey pinched their lips shut and didn't say anything.

Rob's head almost brushed the ceiling as he followed along at the end of the group. When they hit the fourth floor, he asked: "Do you know what room it is?"

Mal nodded. "One-twenty-nine." She told him.

"We'll wait here while you take Ella and Rob down," Audrey suggested.

"You can head up if you want." Mal shrugged. "We'll catch up. One-Eighty, right?"

Audrey nodded, and they continued up the last flight of stairs. Ben, Mal, Rob, and Ella walked down the corridor. Rob counted aloud to himself as they walked. "One-forty-one, One-thirty-nine, One-thirty-seven." He whispered, pointing at each of the doors as they walked past.

A door opened and a little girl with pink hair sprinted out with a backpack. "Bye, mom!" She called. She skidded to a stop when she saw Mal and curtsied with a cheery: "Hi Queen Mal!" before she continued her sprint down to the stairwell.

Mal checked her watch. "School started an hour ago." She mentioned, then shrugged. "Oh well. People are still getting in the groove of things." She shut the little girl's door for her mom.

"One-thirty-one." Rob counted, then stopped in front of a black door with red numbers on it. "One-twenty-nine." He breathed.

Mal patted his shoulder. "Want me to knock, or do you want to?" She asked. Rob immediately stepped back and gestured for Mal to go ahead. The purplette stepped up and rapped quickly on the door. She heard music coming from the other side and smiled at Ben. "Isle music." She laughed. "I don't think you've ever heard it before."

The door opened. It was Dizzy, who was tucking her black gloves into her apron and brushing her hands off. Music carried out into the hall. Ben raised his eyebrow when he heard the words 'Chillin like a Villain' blare out into the corridor. When Dizzy saw who was calling, her face broke into a smile. "Mal!" She screamed excitedly, jumping forward and throwing her arms around the queen.

"Hi, Queen Ella." Dizzy waved behind Mal's back.

"Oof, careful Dizzy," Mal groaned as she fumbled for her balance for a second. "You're going to make me throw up again. Can I use your bathroom?"

Everyone chuckled as Dizzy carefully withdrew herself. Ben threw his hands up into the air behind his wife. "Take down guardians and fight goddesses, no problem, but if she gets hugged…" He muttered angrily.

"The bathroom's down the hall if you need it." Dizzy chuckled. "Who's this?" She looked at Rob curiously.

"Thanks." Mal rolled her eyes. "This, Dizzy would be your uncle Rob. Anastasia's husband. He's
come to the Isle to live with her."

Dizzy held out a hand and eagerly shook Rob's. "I'm so excited to meet you." She exclaimed. Rob gave her a sad smile.

"And Dizzy," Mal said quickly. "I have one other thing I need to discuss with you, but first, could you please go and fetch your Aunt?"

"Yeah." Dizzy agreed. "Be right back." She disappeared back into the apartment, leaving the door open.

"What an enthusiastic little girl." Rob hummed.

"Yeah, she's a keeper." Mal chuckled.

Anastasia appeared in the doorway, pulling off another pair of stained gloves. She wiped her face, leaving a stain of white behind, and then looked up. Her mouth dropped open. "Oh!" She exclaimed. She launched forward and threw her arms around Rob. "Oh, Rob!" She exclaimed.

Rob picked her up off the ground and spun her in a circle. He kissed her soundly and pressed the flowers into her hands. Anastasia was blushing like a new bride. Ella made a small sound in the back of her throat. "Anastasia." She whispered. "Your hair…"

Anastasia smiled and ran her fingers through her hair. "Dizzy did it." She explained. It was a dark brown with pretty light highlights. "Oh, Cinderella, thank you." She stepped away from Rob just to give Ella a quick hug.

"Oh," Ella's face fell. "Actually, I just go by Ella now, remember?"

"Oh, that's right." Anastasia nodded as she returned to Rob's embrace. "Sorry. I'm glad you went back to it. It's a pretty name." She glimpsed Mal then. "Oh, Mal, you're absolutely glowing!" She exclaimed.

Mal felt her face with a confused look. "Really?" She asked. "I actually haven't used magic today at all."

Ben elbowed her. "Hormones." He told her. "They give you clearer skin. People call it a glow." At his description, Mal's face soured.

Anastasia took Rob's hand. "I've got to show you around the place. Come on inside. I think Dizzy is just finishing up the customer I was helping. Do you have anything to put away?"

Rob shook his head and followed his wife inside their apartment. Mal followed, and after a moment, so did Ben and Ella.

In the living room was a hair chair and a large mirror with lots of different products and tools lined up on a table pushed up beside the window. A woman was getting her hair dyed dark brown with white streaks. White streaks seemed to be popular. Harry, Uma, and now this person.

A beautifully patterned rug was on the floor beside the hair chair. Not near enough for anything to accidentally be dropped on it, but close enough to act as decoration for the small room. Mal patted Ben's arm. "I need to use the restroom," she whispered.

As she disappeared down the hall, the woman in the chair opened her eyes and realized she was in a room with the king of Auradon. She jumped up and clenched her fingers around the armrests of
the chair. "Calm down." Dizzy soothed. "He's just dropping off my uncle."

"We're here to talk to you too," Ben told Dizzy. "We have something important we need to talk with you about."

"Give me five minutes to let me finish this customer up," Dizzy said. She began to pin the woman's hair atop her head, so she could dry it with a dryer chair pushed up on the opposite side of the mirror. She helped her up out of the chair, guided her to the second one, and started it up for her before she made her way to the sink and began to scrub the dye off of her gloves. "What did you want to talk about?" She asked Ben.

Mal appeared from back down the hall, wiping her hands on her jeans. "Sorry." She apologized. "Dizzy, do you have a moment?"

"Mal, we got it." Ben rolled his eyes.

"Oh, sorry." Mal leaned onto Ben's arm and he pulled her into his grip, pinching her side a little.

"Dizzy, you remember Queen Ella, right?" Ben gestured to Ella, who was twisting her hands and smiling nervously. Dizzy nodded and waved to the older woman with a bright smile. "She recently lost her son and is looking to get another child, which is something she's always wanted," Ben explained in a wonderous, hushed tone. "And she came to Mal and asked if it'd be okay to ask if you wanted to be adopted by her."

Dizzy's eyes grew huge. "Really?" She asked in a hushed tone.

Ella nodded and crouched down a little. "You could come to Auradon, and go to Auradon Prep. Evie, your friend, is at Auradon Accelerated, where you can go in a few years if you want. And later, you'll have the opportunity to decide if you want to be the queen of Cinderellasburg and Charmington."

Dizzy pressed her palms to her eyes. Ben and Mal exchanged a small smile. "What do you say?"

Mal whispered. "Yes!" Dizzy nodded. She hurried to Queen Ella and wrapped her up in a bone-crushing hug. "I can't wait! Do you have any flowers where you live? What was your son's name? Can I still do crafts and hair at all?" Dizzy paused for a breath and frowned. "I don't know if I'd want to be a queen." She confessed. "That sounds really, really hard."

"That's okay." Queen Ella smiled. "I don't want you to feel like you have to be one."

"Ella," Mal said, tilting her head to the side. "There were a number of misplaced children on the Isle, who I think were placed with a general volunteer guardian in one of the larger family homes outside. We could stop by on the way out and you could take home two children instead of one. Only if you're comfortable, and if Charming would be okay with it."

Ella's eyes lit up. "I'd like to stop if only to see all the kids." She admitted. She looked at Dizzy. "Are you okay with that?" She asked.

Dizzy nodded excitedly. "I've always wanted siblings! I can't wait!"

Ella looked at Mal. "Is there any paperwork I need to fill out, or anything?"

"Nope." Mal shook her head. "I'll have either Evelyn or Eliza label her as gone and we'll mark off any possessions she takes with her."
"There won't be much," Dizzy said. "Most of the things Aunt Anastasia will still need to run the shop. Oh!" Her face fell. "I didn't ask if it'd be okay with her if I left! What if she needs me?"

"Go and ask." Ella prompted. "But don't forget; she won't be alone."

Dizzy took off down the hall as the song changed in the shop. Ben gave the speaker, which was one of the items Mal had repaired, an odd look. "What is this music?" He asked.

Mal laughed. "Listen closely." She told him.

Ben furrowed his brow as the opening bars led into the first verse, and looked back at Mal. "Is this you?" He asked in surprise.

"They say I'm evil, and that makes me glad." Mal sang along in response. Ben could also pick out Jay, Evie, and Carlos's voices, all singing about how bad they were.

"I can't believe it," Ben said. "You used to make music?"

"Not really." Mal wrinkled her nose. "It was more like… a calling card. We sang it whenever we were going around making things hard for other people. People heard it and associated it with a sign of our power."

"Rotten to the Core?" Ben asked with a deadpan expression. "That was your calling card?"

"We later revamped it." Mal slipped out from under his arm and headed to see if she could change the song. "Then our calling card became 'Long Live Evil'. I had a logo I spray painted on everything."

"Yeah, I think I saw that when we went to the Isle." Ben nodded. "Jay snickered about it."

"He was probably thinking about how much of a one-eighty my personality had done since then." Mal shrugged. "I bet I could still rule with a spray can. Here."

The speaker stopped in the middle of the 'Rotten to the Core' song and started in the middle of a new one.

"W-I-C-K-E-D!" Mal and her friends yelled from the speaker. "We've got all the ways to be! W-I-C-K-E-D! Apple, apple, dip, dip. Wanna try it? Tick-Tick. Take a bite, come on be bold. Change the way the story's told!"

Ben held up his hands in sarcastic surrender. Mal laughed. "I had a solo song too." She changed the song again and spread her arms as the first lines started. "Everybody seen my sunlight, everybody seen my shine. But they don't know my story; they don't know what's on my mind." Ben rolled his eyes as she continued to hum. "I carry on like a princess but man, I've got 'em fooled. Cause underneath my business I am cold, I'm hard, I'm cruel."

"Whatever." Ben scoffed. "Cold, hard, and cruel? Yeah, that's not what you sounded like at all last night." The moment the words left his mouth, he was slapping a hand over it. Mal began to crack up. "On the phone!" He quickly specified, turning to a red-faced, thoroughly-amused Queen Ella. "She was on the phone with Audrey and – ugh!" Ben began to walk out of the room, back towards the door with the tips of his ears burning.

Dizzy came back down the hall with Anastasia and Rob following. "She said yes!" Dizzy exclaimed as she jumped into Ella's grasp.
Mal started backing towards the door as the queen's expression faded to awe. "We need to go catch up with the rest of our group. Ella, can we run upstairs and grab everyone really quick?" 

Ella gave a bright, tearful smile. "Don't embarrass the boy too badly." She quipped. Mal laughed and slipped back out of the apartment as both Dizzy and Ella began to cry, exchanging little plans and idea of what their new lives in Auradon were going to be like.

"I'm gonna find some trouble – trouble." She sang along to the fading bars as she slung an arm through Ben's. "I'm gonna make some trouble – trouble."

"Ugh." Ben rolled his eyes as he covered his cheeks. "Where's Ella?"

"Getting Dizzy's things together. We're coming back." Mal smiled. "Are you going to die of embarrassment?"

"That was Cinderella." Ben hissed. "One of the most famous of all the royalty in Auradon and – ugh!" He covered his face with his hands.

Mal laughed. "Come on then. Let's get this party started."

Ben slipped an arm around Mal's and they walked down the corridor together, swaying side by side and laughing whenever the echoes of Mal's old songs reached their ears.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

At the end of the day, the Isle had both gained and lost two residents. Queen Ella returned home with a new daughter and a new son, and King Phillip and Queen Aurora returned home tearful empty-nesters, which is something that didn't happen to Kings and Queens very often. King Charming, while he had not been anticipating the second arrival, welcomed them all with open arms.

Mal had discreetly asked Eliza to forward her all the Isle music that had hers, Evie's, Jay's, or Carlos's signatures on it. She figured it'd be a pretty great inside joke for her friends to laugh with. Meanwhile, change was coming to the Isle of the Lost. She'd just approved the first plans for a city council. It was a landmark decision - Auradon was shocked that she'd agreed to give up her power so willingly. There would be one person for every fifty on the Isle and everyone fourteen or older would be able to cast a vote on representation. Originally, Mal had worried about making the age so young, but considering that she'd become an Auradon Queen at sixteen, she couldn't argue age very well. The council would take over most of the day-to-day running that Mal had been trying to accomplish every time she returned from the moorlands. They would arrange for buildings to be put up and pick places for classes and events to be held and while she still held power over them, they'd become a very important group as far as helping her balance her power and cater to all of her citizens.

Votes could be cast from everyone's city cards, and as an incentive, Mal gave everyone an extra five points for casting votes.

Auroria announced changes to their monarchy the day after Mal’s changes were announced to the Isle and to Auradon. They were creating a dual-branch system. One Legislative Branch held power over law-making, over the courts, and over the economic side of things. This branch would be made up of elected individuals. The Monarchy was now the Executive Branch, in charge of Auroria's standing militia, the emergency and public services, and law-passing. A system of appeals was set up - if one side handled something incorrectly, the people could petition the other side to take effect. Auroria's ruling family had lost more than half of their ruling power, as now the Legislative side and the people had a greater say in things, and the responsibility shift would make it so that the appointed ruler didn't even have to be in the kingdom to rule it. Audrey was free to live on the Isle.

The changes in both the Isle and in Auroria were inspiring Ben to start making changes. Lots of people thought what Auroria was doing was smart, but others were frowning at the obvious disruption of the monarchy's power. Ben wanted to find a way to give common people a sturdy voice without disrupting the power of the royals and making a lot of people mad at him.

Mal called Audrey again from Ben's office as she waited for him to finish up his work. She wanted
to make sure Audrey was doing okay. Audrey picked up as Ben let out a very colorful curse word that made Mal look over with a proud expression. The line was silent for a few seconds, and then Audrey asked: "Was that Ben?"

"That was Ben," Mal confirmed, looking very impressed. Ben looked up and spotted her cell phone up to her ear.

"Who are you calling?" He demanded.

"Sh." Mal rolled her eyes. "It's Audrey. She says she had no idea what a dirty mouth you had."

Audrey giggled and stayed silent on the other end.

Ben grumbled as he raised a pen and made to throw it into the wastebasket beside Mal. "Get it from kissing you." He scoffed as she picked it up.

"Ben says he gets it from kissing me." Mal passed on to Audrey. Ben glared at her.

"Plausible theory." Audrey agreed. Mal burst into laughter. Ben rolled his eyes. He had no way of knowing what Audrey had just said, but he was correct in guessing it wasn't anything flattering. Mal winked at him as he tried to scribble ferociously with another pen. It snapped in two and began to leak all over the desk and Ben's hands. He yelped and jumped back, and sand fell out of his sleeves.

Mal rolled her eyes. "You're messy, Ben." She said as she snapped her fingers. "Hear the tear, remove the wear, fix it up and repair." She recited. The pen and ink jumped back together, but Ben still tossed it into the trash with a grumble. "He just broke a pen and got sand everywhere. This is probably going to have to be a short call. Just wanted to make sure you're in okay?"

"Yeah." Audrey nodded. "Jarrett got me a bat to use alongside my knife, he's picking me up soon so we can go to a party down by the college. I asked Uma and Harry if they wanted to do a group thing, so it's going to be us, them, and Jarrett's friends."

"Sounds fun." Mal smiled. "You guys are cute."

"I think so, too." Audrey giggled. "I'm going to see if I can get him to give me a kiss or something."

Mal cocked her head. "I just had a thought. What's the difference between kissing someone and giving them a kiss? There is none, right?" Audrey hummed on the other end of the phone but said nothing. "What?" Mal asked.

"You just asked an English teacher, honey," Audrey said sympathetically. "Well, like, both the words 'kiss' and 'give' are action words, but when you have 'to give a kiss', give become the primary verb and kiss in demoted to a noun. Then, taking into account the meanings of the two words, to kiss someone is implying a direct course of action and is an immediate and instantaneous motion. To give a kiss, implying it can be rejected, has a different meaning due to the subject-verb switch."

Mal blinked. "Well." She hummed. "I'm not sorry I asked. How do you cram all that information into your head?"

"Languages have always been easy for me." Audrey chuckled. "Maybe I'll write a book one day."

"Yeah, for real." Mal sighed. "You'd be great at it. If I ever decide to write a book, which is admittedly unlikely, you're first on my list to help me out."
"Gladly." Audrey chuckled.

Ben ripped up a yellow lined paper into shreds and pitched it into the wastebasket. A handful of sand followed the arc into the trash, which only made Ben even more cross.

"Okay." Mal sighed. "Ben's losing his crap. I need to put a beast to bed. Stay safe tonight, huh?"

"Yup." Audrey giggled. "Jarrett should be here soon. Good luck with your beast."

"Ugh." Mal scoffed. 'I'll need it. Bye.'

Mal hung up and went to go pat Ben's shoulder. "I'm calm, I'm calm." He muttered, crossing his hands in front of his face.


"Calm." Ben accentuated.

Mal gave him a quick hug. "Does someone need a drive? Or a movie?" She kissed his cheek. "Or sleep?"

Ben sighed and put his head down on the desk.

"You've been really angsty ever since you came back from the Overland," Mal commented. "It doesn't seem to be going away. Do you need to go to one of those, oh what're they called… Auradon emotion doctors?"

"Therapists." Ben supplied. "No, I don't think so. I don't know." He shook his head. His brow bone rocked against the surface of his desk. "I just… really need this to work and go nicely."

Mal glanced over his shoulder. "Maybe you've been looking at it too long." She suggested. "Want to bounce ideas off of me?"

Ben stayed silent for a few seconds, and then slowly sat back up. He exhaled and picked up a paper filled with notes. "I like what you've done with the Isle and what Audrey's doing with Auroria." He started, sounding exhausted. "I want to do something like that here to give the people more say, but the royal families will be mad if I take power away from them. I can't find a balance."

Mal glanced over his shoulder. "Let's start with two, like Audrey's kingdom."

"Two what?" Ben sighed.

"Representatives." Mal elaborated. "One member of the royal family, or the ruling couple, and one elected member of the city."

"But that still divides the ruling party's power in two." Ben sighed.

"Let the royal families pick who they want." Mal shrugged. "Invite people to run for the post, have citizens vote. The two candidates with the highest votes when all is said and done will be the two the royal family can choose to work with."

Ben was still as he squinted at the far wall. "Maybe..." He started, then stopped. "But... when..." He put his head back down. "Maybe I have been looking at this for too long. That was a lot easier than I was making it out to be in my head." It would still divide power in two, but it was a start that wouldn't result in people calling for his head.
Mal rubbed his back with a chuckle. "Yeah, I think you need a break. Come on, let's get you to bed."

"Wait." Ben shot straight back up. "Can we please keep working on this?" He jutted his lower lip out and looked at her pleadingly.

"Can you handle it?" Mal asked skeptically.

"Yes. Just… what would you do as far as who has more sway in the kingdoms? Because these other people would be elected, wouldn't they be more popular?" Ben asked, picking up a pen and testing it carefully.

"Leave the lawmaking and most of the daily running in the hands of the royals." Mal yawned. "And then let things balance out kingdom to kingdom. The elected can serve as representatives to the crown for instances like when you had to call everyone to the war council meetings, and they can argue problems and concerns the people have to the Royals."

"And when that's not happening?" Ben asked.

"Check over past laws and figure out which are outdated." Mal shrugged. "Auradon probably has a lot of those."

Ben nodded in acquiescence. As he wrote down all of her suggestions, Mal started to head towards the door. "Kay, I'm tired and I want to go to bed. Are you coming?"

Ben looked up and nodded. "Yeah. Wait ten seconds for me?"

Mal sighed. "Ten, nine, eight." She started to count back. Ben clicked his pen and put it away. He hurried to make it to the door and flipped off the light on his way out. "We should race to our room," Mal suggested. "See if you can dissolve like Pitch, Eris, and Helena."

"Really rather would not," Ben grumbled, slumping his posture a little.

"No, you seriously should," Mal disagreed. "You'll get more comfortable with your magic the more you use it. Come on." She bumped her shoulder against his. "Try."

Ben frowned but sighed in acquiescence. He'd spent too many hours learning about magical creatures that had been hurt by Auradon's laws to think she was lying. He held up his hand and imagined a sandstorm arising around his knuckles. Immediately, as though it had been waiting for his prompting, it appeared. Thick and swirling, dark indigo sands. Ben imagined his hand disappearing and immediately felt his hand dissolve into the sand. The cloud grew thicker. Ben swallowed and quickly put it back.

"Not bad," Mal said with raised eyebrows and a smile. "Think you can do your whole body now?"

"Mal, please don't make me!" Ben's shoulders slumped.

Mal put a hand on his shoulder. "Why are you so afraid?" She asked. "You can do this."

"I don't want to..." Ben mumbled, covering his eyes with his hands. "Listen, all of this... I hate it. It's burning me from the inside out and..."

"That's because you won't use it," Mal sighed. "If you'd use it, it wouldn't burn." She leaned back against the wall and examined him, tilting her head as she watched the shadows cross her face. "Helena is gone," She whispered. "I know that this magic started hers, but it's yours now. And
using it isn't going to let her win. It's going to help you start moving forward and leaving her in the past where she belongs."

"I still feel her," Ben admitted. "I still feel her hands, Mal. I don't like it."

Mal stayed still, watching him clench and unclench his hands. Slowly, she reached forward and took one. They started to walk down the hall together. Mal's throat felt tight as she tried to tell him what she wanted to say. "I still feel hands too," she broke out finally. Ben furrowed his brow at her. "I still feel... my mom's hands on me. People who hurt me. People from the Isle. I still feel their cuts and their hits. I mean - I even still feel Chad's hand on me!" She took her hand from him and twisted her palms against each other in a frantic, nervous motion. "He's dead and I still feel him. I feel them all. You're not like that. You always put everything behind you but when people get hurt the way you're hurt you can't just put it behind you."

She stopped to face him, though it was hard to raise her eyes to look at him. "And I understand what it's like to look in the mirror and see something that someone did to you," she choked. "I see my mom looking back at me all the time. My magic is her magic, and my features are hers. But... they're not. No matter what she did in the past, this is what I am now." She took his hand again now and ran her fingertips over his palm. "You have magic now. And it's not hers. It's yours."

Ben let her hold his hand for a second longer, circling her index finger against his skin. "You move on so easily," he whispered. "How?"

Mal snorted. She took his face in her hands. "Ben, one day, your name will be inscribed as the greatest king in Auradonian History. No matter where you think your talents lie, no matter the things you can will your body to do, no matter who hurts you. Do you really think that will change?" She put her arms around him. "Helena couldn't stop that destiny if she tried. The people love you. I love you. Don't quit yourself, Ben. Magic doesn't change who you are at heart."

Ben took her shoulders and nodded. "Okay." He whispered. He leaned in and kissed her cheek while using her hip to pull her close to him. His thumb skimmed her torso and Mal let out a breath. Sooner or later, he knew, she'd have to get over her anxiety, one way or another. "I'll give you a twenty-second head-start."

Mal smiled brightly. "Proud of you." She kissed him on his cheekbone, close to his hairline. Then she hurried off down the hall, with her wings growing out as she did. Her horns still hadn't naturally retracted from all the magic she'd been performing up north. They stuck out from her skull like odd little curls. Ben chuckled, counted to twenty, and let a small sandstorm form around his hand again. He took a deep breath, and let it expand all throughout his body. The air around him thickened with sand. Then, instantaneously, he felt himself dissolve and dropped to the ground. His body was gone, and he was only sand on wind he could control.

He zoomed through the halls, and as he brushed past Mal, who was soaring through the corridors, he made sure to skim over her wings, so she would know he was beating her. He made it to their room and rematerialized into himself. It felt like a burden had been lifted off of his soul, and he felt better than he had in ages. He felt light, really, and it was because he wasn't resisting something that was, whether he liked it or not, a part of him now.

And it was all because of her. Mal.

Ben issued a royal proclamation before he left that every kingdom was to elect a representative in court from the general populace and that each year, in the week leading up to the summer solstice, they would adjourn at Beast's castle to discuss national laws, how they had affected the citizens,
and either abolish or improve upon them all. He and Mal left Auradon before the uprise could occur, directing Belle and Adam to tell everyone to hold on to their questions, remain calm, and they would answer them later.

Mal and Ben paused in Arendelle to pick up Jack and then took off towards the Overland. Now that the heroes were winning, and they weren't being pushed around as much, they had set up permanent headquarters in Turbotown, Indianapolis. Ben, Mal, and Jack flew in to see how things were going.

One of North's yeti's led them upstairs to a grand room that was painted red with gold drywall sculpting. It was octagonal in shape, with sleek black tiles on the floor. A large circular table with many chairs sat in the center of the room. Everyone looked up when North's yeti opened the door and announced the three of them in a series of grunts.

The war tribunal looked strong, healthy and relaxed compared to when Mal had first shown up, sassy and angry about her husband being captured. Most of them still didn't know what to think of Mal, but they were grateful for her help nonetheless.

North stood up. "Jack! You have returned! Queen Mal, you look radiant! Absolutely glowing! And King Ben-" North walked over, put his hands on Ben's shoulders, and looked deep into his eyes. "You are feeling well, yes?"

"Yes." Ben nodded with a small smile.

"We were so worried we were going to lose you for a while there!" Toothiana chirped. She was floating about two feet above her chair. Ben waved a little at her. The Sandman was flashing all sorts of worried pictures above his head.

"Yeah," Mal agreed softly. "It was a bit scary."

Ben ducked his head at all the attention and pulled out a chair for Mal. She sat down with a sigh. Like someone had flipped a switch, the attention was all on her.

"How are you feeling, your highness?" Hiccup asked. He was holding Astrid's hand above the table.

"Just Mal." Mal sighed with a yawn. "I'm peachy. Just flew an ocean, guys."

"Her nausea is starting to give, but her back is a little sore." Ben supplied as he sat next to her.

"M'fine. I'll rest as soon as we take out Eris." Mal yawned.

"No news on her, yet?" Jack asked.

"Naw, mate," Bunny said as he painted an egg on the table. "By the way Jack, where'd you go? You weren't hanging out with these two blokes, eh?" He gestured his paintbrush towards Ben and Mal.

Jack shook his head. "They were doing official stuff. I helped Mal take Pitch to the Isle, we went to the Fairy Godmother and gave her and her daughter the remnants of Dama Fortuna's wand, and yeah, I hung out. It was nice."

Mal squinted. Ben exchanged a glance with her and shook his head. He had long since realized that not everyone was as clued into Jack's excursions in Auradon as he and Mal were.
"Sure that's all?" Bunny asked. "These two look like they know you left somethin' out." He gestured again to Ben and Mal, who schooled their expressions.

"That's basically it." Jack shrugged. He refused to budge on Bunny's expression.

"Sorry." Hiccup cleared his throat, changing the subject. He was examining Ben with a bit of an odd expression. "Is that… dragon skin on your neck?"

"I wasn't going to ask, but then you did." Astrid sighed. Ben's hand went to his neck and he shrunk back.

"Yeah." Mal nodded. She held a hand for him to take. "From Helena Apatre Troy, Pitch Black, and Eris's daughter. She's the one girl I took to the Isle a while ago? She scratched him, and he got magical poisoning from it. The scales match mine in my dragon form. We think they're the residue of my magic in him."

Tooth crinkled her nose. "Is magical poisoning like magic denaturation? Where the magic turns against your body?"

"Basically." Mal nodded.

"But… there's no cure for that." Bunny squinted at his work.

Mal smirked. "I don't exactly take 'no' for an answer."

Ben cleared his throat. "She burned it out of my system. There were side effects. For example," He held out the hand Mal wasn't holding and conjured a pile of sand in his palm. The Sandman drifted into the air in excitement. Tiny exclamation points appeared over his head as he pointed at the pile in Ben's hand.

"Wait, wait." Bunny put down his egg, which tried to walk away. "You got Eris's magic? Or Pitch's?"

"Both, I think." Ben flushed. "I mean, it's from Helena. We think she had both. Mine's a different color, but-"

"You could get into Tartarus." Hiccup interrupted. "That's why you've come back. You're going to try and… what, rip Eris out of her realm?"

"That sounds like a lot of work." Mal groaned. "Why don't we just chain her inside using her own powers?"

"That'd work." Jack nodded.

"So, is that it?" Astrid gasped. "Just like that? We've been fighting this war for ages, and you're just going to end it in three months?"

Ben smiled. "What can we say? She's too busy to keep fighting a war for too long."

Mal chuckled. She looked up at North. "I hope to not be bothered for like, eight months after this." She warned. "I have two other kingdoms that need me now. Not to mention Ben's." She squeezed his hand.

North's eyes filled with tears. "Aye." He agreed. "Hopefully afterward, we can convince you to come up here and make this land like the Isle is. When do you leave?"
"Soon." Mal turned to Ben. "Then we can go back home." She cheered.

"Soon." He agreed, rubbing her knuckles with a smile.

"How is that big battle going with the nightmares?" Mal asked. "Jack and I left early to track Pitch to his home."

"Ended." North smiled. "You never heard, but when you bound Pitch, the nightmares faded away. Sandy collected their remains." He gestured to the sunny little man, who waved with a jovial grin.

"Sweet." Mal smiled. "What more is there, then?"

"Grimmel the Grisly and Alvin the Treacherous, who lead an army of enslaved dragons in the far north, Kai, who stays mostly in the east and attacks where he sees fit, Hernan Cortes, Colonel James Armstrong in the far northeast, and other villains." Toothiana pointed at a large map that had been unrolled on the table. "None of them are a huge problem though. Would it be okay for us to send them to the Isle of the Lost when we capture them? We're willing to take them back, but it'll help keep them from being rescued."

"I could keep them." Mal shrugged. "They'd probably get along just fine with our nasties." She examined the map. "So, these guys, they don't sound like problems."

"They're not." Jack rolled his eyes. "They're just tedious and fast. Last time we got them by chasing them for two days and trapping them. I got Hernan by freezing his horse's legs."

"If only we had two Jack Frosts." Astrid sighed. "It'd go twice as fast."

The yeti opened the door to the room again and bellowed out an announcement. An icy chill crept into the room. North hummed. "Ask and ye shall receive." He muttered.

It took a moment for her to process that sentiment. Two Jack Frosts? Two people with powers of ice and snow? Well, she knew of some people, but all of them were in Auradon unless-

Mal spun in her chair. In the doorway was Ericka, twisting her new lemon staff in her hands. She wore a dark blue fur parka with white fur lining the collar and hems, just like her mother's. She wore dark grey leggings with snowflake patterns and combat boots. Her hair was braided exactly like her mothers, and she was twisting her staff nervously.

Mal glanced at Jack. He looked even paler than usual, and his eyes were wide as he stared at his twenty-four-year-old daughter.

"Who're you?" Bunny asked, standing up and sniffing the cold in the air.

Ericka straightened up. "Sorry, I'm late." She said coolly, curtsying in the doorway. "My name is Ericka. I've come to support the war effort."

"Oh no, you haven't!" Jack snapped. It began to snow lightly in the room.

"How did you get here, Ericka?" Mal asked softly. Ericka swallowed, clutched her staff and rose into the air. Just like Jack. Mal exhaled.

"You were right, Queen Mal. The staff did help me focus my powers. In fact, I decided that it's time to come north and prove myself." Ericka glanced sideways at her father, whose eyes were stormy.
Ben turned to Mal. "You got her a staff?" He asked. "When did you do that?"

Mal only glanced up at Jack.

"This is great!" North exclaimed. "Now we have two ice spirits! And if she is anything like Queen Mal, she will be extremely beneficial!"

"No!" Jack snapped. He landed hard on the table. "I'm sorry, she can't fight. Ericka, go home." He pointed back out the door and down the hall.

Ericka's eyes hardened. "No." She said. "I'm a grown woman. I can choose where I'm going."

"This is a war!" Jack yelled. "Not a playground. Go home, Ericka."

"Jack." Astrid interrupted. "What's your deal? I've never seen you like this."

"Someone's got a crush," Bunny muttered loudly.

Mal squeezed her eyes shut as both Jack and Ericka sputtered. Ben groaned softly. It was almost too painful to listen to.


Ericka, however, looked around at everyone in the room. She focused on Mal. "Do they not know?" She asked her.

The snow falling from the ceiling grew thicker. North coughed loudly. "Jack, shut it off." He called.

"Ya, you gobbey!" Bunny agreed, cradling the eggs closer to his chest. "You're freezing my eggs!"

"Let her fight, Jack." Mal stood up, commanding respect from everyone in the room.

The snowstorm stopped abruptly. Jack stared at her, looking like he'd been betrayed. "Mal…" He trailed off. "You can't possibly…"

"I'm seventeen and pregnant," Mal said through gritted teeth. "She's twenty-one, has the same powers you do, and will be fine. She can take care of herself. She's durable. Besides, look at the mess you're causing." She gestured around the room. Snow drifts were forming in the corners.

"Yeah, d-dude." Ericka stammered. "I can do this!"

Jack clutched his staff tightly, and without another word, left. He flew out the door and down the hall. Frost garnered on the floor down his path. Mal sighed and turned to Ericka. "You flew all the way from Arendelle?" She whispered. Ericka nodded slowly. "And does your mother know you're up here?" She whispered. Ericka shook her head.

"Everyone," Ben stood up beside Mal. "This is Ericka, in case you didn't hear. She's the daughter of Queen Elsa in Arendelle, who has ice powers she passed down to her two daughters."

Bunny snorted. "Two daughters? With ice powers? Yeah, I wonder where Jack has been the last week."

Ericka sputtered in indignation. Mal cleared her throat. "Astor." She said softly. "With all due respect, you have no idea what you're talking about." She sighed and turned back to Ericka. "If you get hurt, your mom and dad will have my hide." She cautioned. "Are you sure you can do this?"
War isn't a prank game."

Ericka squared her shoulders. "Yes." She nodded. "I know I can do this. I won't let you down.

Mal nodded, suddenly exhausted. "Okay." She turned to Ben. "Let's not go today. I don't think I'd be able to walk straight."

Ben nodded. "Let's figure out where my things went and find you a place to rest." He offered. He stood and inclined his head to those at the table, "It was nice to catch up with you all." He helped Mal out of her chair and towards the stairs. As they passed, he squeezed Ericka's arm. "Be careful." He warned. Mal hesitated by the doors and examined the rigid posture Ericka kept. There was something about that girl that… Mal just couldn't put her finger on. It was like something was off about her existence, and she couldn't figure out what that thing might be.

North and Bunny called them to gather in a lounging area that night, hoping to get some details of their plan, patch up some plans for what they were supposed to do on their end, and catch up more on what had happened to Ben when Mal had taken him back to Auradon. The sun was setting outside and the night air was drifting through the open doors when Ben and Mal wandered inside and he guided her to take a seat on the couch facing the open window. Ericka was sitting in an armchair with her boots set on the coffee table. Sandy immediately soared over to show off his sand skills to Ben, who summoned a few small things to watch the Sandman's eyes light up. Mal closed her eyes and leaned her head back into the armrest of the couch with her legs over Ben's lap. Two pairs of heavy hands fell onto her shoulders and fur brushed her face. "Ah, here she is!" Someone announced with an accent. "The star of the show!"

Mal sighed and opened an eye. "Where?" She asked in a bored tone. "I must have missed them when I walked in."

Everyone laughed. Hiccup, Astrid, North, and Toothiana all gathered closer. Astrid sat down near Mal on the coffee table and leaned towards her. "So, are you sure you'll be good to fight tomorrow? Aren't you afraid of losing your baby or anything?"

Mal found Ben's hand and squeezed a little. Their skin both felt clammy. She shook her head. "This is one of those things that won't happen if I don't want it to happen," She exhaled. Everyone laughed.

"Everything is like that for you," Bunny laughed, taking his paws off her shoulders. "Queen of Auradon casually deciding she doesn't want a forty-year-old war to go on any longer, casually shapeshifts and destroys all of our major opponents." Everyone laughed and North handed Ben a glass with some sort of amber liquid in it. Other glasses went around. Mal didn't comment when someone put a water in her hand. This was like her wedding reception all over again.

"You know, the person who manages to kill Queen Mal will be neither incredibly lucky or incredibly foolish, but an uncanny mix of both." Hiccup laughed. Mal flinched a little and kept her eyes closed as Ben took his hand from her and put it on her leg. His skin was cold. "Death itself doesn't dare come for this woman. She controls him."

"That's high praise," Mal mumbled, though the words tasted sour in her mouth. Death was, of course, one of the few things she couldn't control.

"I agree. So, tell me, your Majesty, is there anything you can't do?" Ericka asked with a little smile. Mal opened her eyes and watched Ben raise his glass, swirl its contents a little, and then look over
to meet her eyes. She didn't swallow, didn't shiver, didn't do anything to show discomfort as she replied: "I'm sure there's a list somewhere." Everyone laughed. Across the table, Ben closed his eyes and took a drink. Everyone else raised their glasses. Mal took in the scene, watching silently as everyone toasted her inevitable win, and making a list in her head.

1. She couldn't have brandy, or any alcohol, even if she was already of age. She couldn't have it because she was pregnant; carrying Ben's child, and everyone knew it and would stop her. 2. She couldn't bring people back from the dead. Not anyone. Not her mother, a magical person, and most certainly not Ben if he were to die. Once someone was gone, they were gone, and she could only prolong life, not bring it back.

Mal closed her eyes again. 3.) She couldn't, under sacrifice of her mental health, have this baby. And there was no way she could tell Ben that.

"What are your plans after this?" Tooth asked, floating above her head. "Because we'd love to keep you up here. Ben told us you had ways to heal pollution and pillaging?"

Mal took a gulp of her water, trying to stay focused on the conversation. "Not me - we have naturous people in the moorlands. They have plants that just eat pollution up. I could bring some."

"Would you consider being our queen when the war is over and helping us reorganize our cities and communities?" Astrid asked, reaching down to touch Mal's belly. "Or are you going to stay in Auradon for your baby and Ben?"

"You don't have permission to touch me don't. "I don't think I have time to be queen here," Mal smiled through a stretched mouth. "Why are you making it seem like I only have options between helping you and being a mom?" "But I don't know what I'll do yet."

Ben squeezed her leg again. "I hope we can take things easy," he told her, looking at her in this way that made her feel obligated to hold eye contact. "Take a vacation and not worry about Kingdoms or running from place to place. I just want to slow down before things get crazy."

Mal pushed his hand off her leg. She'd never felt so far from him. "I might go spend time with my dad or stay in the Moorlands or... something. We'll have to see."

But in the end, she wasn't sure how much her opinion would matter. All these people wanted so many different things for her, and she didn't even know what she wanted herself. She'd been trying to do so many things for so many people... she didn't even know how to help herself anymore.

Mal woke in the middle of the night to the sounds of frost crunching on the roof above her head. She looked over to Ben, but he was fast asleep with a golden dreamsand vision dancing above his head, courtesy of the sandman. The figure of sand was Mal, spinning a little girl with a blunt haircut around in her arms. Mal tilted her head. So, Ben wanted a little girl. Flattering.

She opened the window and a sharp breeze flew in. Ben shivered but did not wake. "Jack? Ericka?"

"Mal?" She asked.

Mal frowned. "What are you doing out here?" She asked. "It's deathly cold."
Ericka shrugged. "The cold doesn't really bother me." She whispered. She floated down, further into view. Her lemon staff was clutched in her hand.

"Is it working well for you?" Mal asked, giving it a gesture.

"Yes." Ericka nodded. "But… there's something strange. I don't know if it's strange with me, or my staff, but I can't seem to lay my finger on it."

Mal held out a hand with a furrowed brow. Ericka floated forward and placed her palm hesitantly in Mal's grasp. Mal lowered her eyes into the second realm and examined Ericka's magical makeup. She hummed.

"What is it?" Ericka asked.

"Nothing's off with the staff," Mal reported. "I think it's with you. Most of your magic is functioning normally, like mine, but around your head, there's some stalling. I think it's in your brain."

"Am I dying?" Ericka asked cautiously.

"No, I don't think so," Mal reported. "It's just… maybe it's biological? Elsa or Jack might have the same thing." Behind her, Ben snorted in his sleep and rolled over a little. He remained out of it, though. The little dreamsand girl ran to a dreamsand figure of Mal herself, and Mal waved the vision away before Ericka could comment on it.

"Should I see a doctor?" Ericka asked, pushing her bangs out of her face.

Mal hummed and let Ericka's hand drop back to the girl's side. "Maybe? You might have to go to the Moors though, to find a doctor of magic."

"You think it's magic related?" Ericka asked.

"Well, I just found a lull in the magic around your head." Mal shrugged. "I don't know if it'd show up the same with normal technology."

Ericka nodded. "I'll look into it. Thank you, your highness."

"Just Mal." Mal rolled her eyes. She hesitated. Jack Frost and Queen Elsa's girl starts having problems with the magic flowing through her head less than a week after she starts using the magic she inherited from her father properly and… that just happened? "Ericka?" She asked softly. "What do you know of Jack Frost's abilities?"

"Dad?" Ericka asked with a raised brow. "He and I are pretty similar, mom's told me. Supernatural can conjure or manipulate ice and snow, like mom, can conjure weapons of ice, summon and controls winds, can fly, among other things. He can bewitch people with feelings of joy and happiness, which I can't do, and he's immortal, of course." Ericka tapped off each of her fingers as she listed things. Mal bit her cheek.

"Immortal." She murmured. "Does… the brain have anything to do with aging?" Ericka shrugged.

Mal waved the young adult inside and found the stone basin in her jacket, which was hanging by the door. She found some clean water to fill it with and called the first person she could think of. "Erick of the Isle." She muttered.

Light filled the room, as did loud laughter and music. Mal heard her song 'Ways to Be Wicked'
echoing around the room from the far distance. "Erick?" She called. The surface moved, and Evie's older brother appeared in her surface of the water. There was an odd double rim around the bowl. Mal realized she was speaking to him out of a drinking glass. "Sorry to interrupt your party." She apologized. "I have a question about the human brain and you were the first person I thought to ask."

Erick scratched his head. "I musta had too much to drink." He muttered. He shook his head. "Okay, I'm not very good at anatomy and physiology though." He warned.

"Does the human brain control aging?" Mal asked.

Erick perked up. "Yes!" He exclaimed. "Scientists discovered seven years ago that stem cells located in the hypothalamus of mice controlled how fast or how slowly the mice grew. The quicker the stem cells declined, the faster they aged. The hypothalamus also controls reproduction, development, and metabolism."

Mal blinked, trying to process all the information he'd just thrown at her. "Okay." She smiled. "That's all I needed. Have a nice party." She made to end the call but heard Erick muttering.

"Nope." He whispered. "Nope. If you're talking to the queen in a water glass, it's time to go home. No more alcohol for you, Erick."

Mal chuckled as the call ended, presumably because poor drunk Erick had dropped the glass somewhere. She poured the water out the window and dried off the inside of the basin.

"What does that all mean?" Ericka asked.

The sky began to turn colors outside. Mal tapped her nails on the window frame and bit her lip. "Maybe..." she trailed off.

"What?" Ericka probed after several moments of Mal not speaking.

Mal turned and met Ericka's eyes. "Maybe... you're more like your dad than you think. Maybe you're not supposed to age either."

Mal watched amazement and dread fall into Ericka's eyes. "But I have aged. I'm twenty-one."

"But for how much longer?" Mal asked.

Ericka's skin pallor began to shift. She approached the window. "Thank you, Mal. I'll look into it." She hopped up on the window frame and blew away before Mal could even say goodbye. She closed the window and laid back down. Immediately, warm hands wrapped around her frozen fingers.

"How long have you been up?" She whispered as someone took her into their curled arms.

"Not long," Ben assured her. "Everything okay?"

Mal hummed, and a sudden wave of nausea hit her. She sat back up. "Give me two minutes to throw up," She started, covering her mouth. "And then, it will be." She stood up and hurried out of the room.
Christmas Eve Chapter.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Mal and Ben's battle in Tartarus.

Chapter Notes

Christmas Day Upload

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ericka and Jack were partnering with Hiccup and Astrid to lead a battle against Grimmel and Alvin. Meanwhile, North, Toothiana, and Sandy would head to find Hernan Cortes. Bunny was hanging with the Auradonian soldiers, checking for wounded, and acting as backup if needed. And while this was all going on, Mal and Ben were getting prepped for battle up in the room they'd slept in, which was beneath the attic but still high off the ground so that they could come and go as needed.

Mal groaned softly as she pulled the straps on her body armor tight. The black material felt restrictive and tight against her sore lower back. Ben helped her up, looking worried. "You okay?" He whispered.

"Yeah." She smiled. "You?"

Ben shrugged. "We're getting there." He muttered. He helped her up and cradled her hand in his. Mal watched, expressionless, as he threaded his fingers through hers. "You know what?" he whispered softly.

"Hmm?" Mal sighed.

"I'm excited." He told her. "I know you're not, and you're still angry, but I really think that this is a great thing. And I know it'll work out in the end. As soon as we're done, we'll have seven months to focus on you and on us, and by the time you have the baby, everything will be okay. We'll make it all okay."

Mal's gut twisted and she carefully took her hand back and sat back down. The more she thought about this, the more it twisted at her mind. She didn't know what to do anymore. Ben knelt down in front of her and put a hand on the side of her face. They stared into each other's eyes for several minutes, and Ben started to lean in to her.

A knock came from the door. Ben went to open it. Behind the threshold stood a grisly man dressed in red. Ben smiled when he saw him. "Sinbad?" He asked.

Sinbad stepped into the room and gave Mal a sarcastic salute, which she returned. He was clearly going on in years, with grey in his beard and hair and wrinkles covering his sun-tanned face. His skin looked like leather, and he was one of the most imposing men Mal had seen off of the Isle.
"I'm here to tell you about Tartarus, right?" Sinbad asked, folding his arms.

"If you could?" Ben asked, folding his hands behind his back. Mal took up a classic Isle stance, leaning back slightly with her hands on her hips.

"There's a star at the 76th longitude, heading east." Sinbad pointed. "When we went, we used a star. The journey took about a week by ship."

"No." Mal rolled her eyes. "If it'll take a week, I'm going to fly as a dragon."

"Probably best." Ben nodded. "But you'll have to turn back into yourself to get into Tartarus."

"You're going to go into Tartarus?" Sinbad asked.

"And seal it from the inside," Mal confirmed.

"Woah, Woah." Sinbad held up his hands, looking alarmed. "Several problems with that plan. One, Tartarus has literally pulled the sea into a chasm that we sailors refer to as 'the edge of the world'. There's nothing around or behind it."

"The world is round." Ben frowned.

"I promise you, dear king, that the world has a gigantic hole in the center of the ocean that surrounds Tartarus." Sinbad rolled his eyes. "If you want in, you'll have to fly over the edge, endure the intense pressure, and jump into Tartarus. If the rumors are true," He elbowed Ben. "And you have her sand powers, you'll be able to get in whether she seals it up or not. Just dissolve into sand and fly in. But little miss here?" He examined Mal from head to toe. "Might not be able to get in."

"Couldn't I dissolve her with me?" Ben asked with a frown.

"Sure." Sinbad nodded. "But lose your kid in the process. That happened to Marina last time Eris captured her. Not fun."

Mal looked at Ben and sighed. "So… if Eris closes the borders to Tartarus, I'm stuck outside?"

That meant Ben would have to do it all alone.

"Yeah." Ben looked a bit sick. "We'll have to be careful."

"Do you think you could open the borders?" Mal asked.

"Probably not." Sinbad interrupted. "I wouldn't plan on that."

A thought struck Mal. "That's so weird." She commented. "I can turn into a dragon and the kid is fine, but if Ben turns me into sand they die?"

"Not your magic." Ben guessed.

Sinbad nodded with a broad gesture to him. "That's it." He agreed.


"How are you going to get out?" Sinbad asked. "If you seal the doors, even Ben's sand powers won't get you out."

Ben's face fell. He looked immediately to Mal. "Oh." She said with a frown. "Well… maybe we
can close it most of the way and then stitch the last bit up from the inside? Or maybe I can tie the locks on the doors to Eris so that her power keeps them closed and therefore, the more power she has, the more shut they are."

"That still doesn't help you." Sinbad pointed out. "Eris has the most power in her little stronghold. Maybe the little opening idea will work, but it will also make your locks dramatically weaker."

"So, do the locks most of the way up the door, and then tie them to Eris?" Ben suggested. "Seal it as we leave and hope for the best." He clapped his hands together.

"I think that's our best bet." Mal agreed with a sigh. She turned to Sinbad. "You've been a great help but… perchance, do you have anything from Tartarus that we could use to guide us instead? I don't think either of us knows how to follow a longitude."

Ben snorted in agreement as Sinbad chuckled. "I think Marina has a handful of sand, but that's it. If we go down to the ship, we can see."

"Wouldn't you have any of Helena's magic?" Ben asked.

"No." Mal shook her head. "I didn't take any of it. And I don't know if Helena belonged in Tartarus so much as she could visit there."

"You know what?" Sinbad said suddenly. He reached around his neck and pulled a leather cord out from underneath his sailor outfit. Threaded on the chord was what looked like a real human nail. Mal stared as Sinbad shook it. "Does it have to be a piece of Tartarus?" Sinbad asked. "Because Marina yanked this off of Eris and we've had it ever since. Bring it back and I'd be more than happy to let you borrow it."

"That'd work." Mal nodded. "Can we use it?"

Sinbad removed the cord from around his neck and dropped it into Mal's outstretched hand. Ben shied away from it uncomfortably.

"Alright," Sinbad said as Mal secured the cord around her own neck. "Now Tartarus has no set landscape. From what I can remember, the sky doesn't move at all. I'd try and remember where you fall in because we didn't leave the way we came. Eris dissolved us and had us rematerialize on an island outside Tartarus. It's all sand and black stones. She can change it to whatever she's feeling like at the moment."

Mal nodded. "Will Eris's pets be there at all?"

"I don't think so." Sinbad shook his head. "They were when we were there, but from what it sounds like, they're all out wreaking havoc on the land."

"Okay," Mal said. She picked up Ben's sword from the stack and a dagger about the length of her forearm. "Let's get out of here." She said, handing Ben's sword to him. He smiled.

Sinbad opened the door. "Good luck to both of you."

"And to you." Ben nodded. "Where are you heading off to?"

"Marina." Sinbad smiled. "We have, as I've heard, a sea of monsters to contain." He saluted them both one last time and began to walk away. Mal smiled and hummed.

"Should we fly?" She asked Ben.
Ben shrugged. "Should I dissolve and meet you there or go with you?" He asked.

"I'd prefer you went with me, so we can stick together," Mal admitted. "Can't you directly travel to Tartarus anyways?"

"If I already knew where it was," Ben answered. He sheathed his sword. "I'll just go with you."

"Kay." Mal nodded. "Let's go and defeat ourselves a sand goddess."

Ben laughed, and Mal walked back into the room. She opened the window and climbed out. She blew Ben a kiss and jumped out. He waited for a few seconds and then saw a mighty dragon fly by. He laughed. "I'm coming, I'm coming!" He called.

Ben swung his legs out of the window sill and stared down at the ground and the roads thousands of feet below. He exhaled slowly and then leaped out into the cold winter air.

---

After following Eris based on her nail for what felt like forever, Ben felt a sharp pull in his navel. Up ahead it was exactly as Sinbad had described, with the sea suddenly falling away as if the world had suddenly ended. Beyond the drop was a doorway that looked like a rip had been torn in the sky. Mal stopped on a small, pitiful-looking island and morphed back to herself with a slight stumble. Ben materialized beside her.

"So, that's it." He breathed.

"Ugh." Mal groaned. "I get not wanting neighbors, but did she have to make it so far?" Ben laughed as she caught her breath. "Can you feel if the place is locked up?" Mal asked.

Ben examined the gates tactfully. "They're not." He decided. "At least, they don't feel like they are."

"Okay." Mal nodded. "Let's go, then."

Ben dissolved and waited for her as she grew her wings out and took to the air. She was unsteady in the air, he noticed. Off-balance.

They flew to the ocean's drop-off and broke over the edge of the chasm. Ben couldn't see the bottom. Carefully, Ben slipped through and began the descent towards Tartarus. The skies inside had the textured of stained glass, with thousands of different colors that changed at rapid speeds. For once, he could feel Mal following him.

They fell through the doors and plummeted towards the ground at a ridiculous speed. As they reached the ground, they naturally slowed, but Ben wasn't worried. He reformed himself on top of the vast golden sands and felt Mal land beside him. She clutched her stomach. "Ugh." She groaned.

"What's wrong?" Ben asked with a frown.

"I just… feel awful all of the sudden. Headache and stomach cramps. Ow." She bent over for a few seconds, then stood back up. "Okay." She sighed. "Where would we find Eris?"

"Me?" A de-personified figure asked. The desert floor shook beneath their feet and rocked back and forth. The sand withered around them to reveal black bricks laid beneath their soles. As the sand blew away further, it revealed a pillaged city built only out of broken beams and black bricks. A figure with greasy, black flowing hair appeared, skirting around the edge of a ruined dwelling.
Eris looked, in a word, horrible. Red sores circled her eyes and something black and smooth had dried on her left cheek. She floated like an amputee would walk – with obvious pain. Mal frowned to see her.

Eris gestured at her city. "You like?" She asked. "I was planning to do the whole world like this, but I don't suppose that'll work now." She sighed. "Have you come to kill me?"

Mal snorted. "Kill a goddess? Surely you respect us enough to know we aren't that stupid."

Eris hummed. "Then, have you come to make me promise to stay in Tartarus? Or to not attack your cities anymore?" She sat down on a pile of black bricks and sighed.

"The promise of a villainess?" Mal scoffed.

"Of a goddess." Eris corrected. "Don't you have any gods or goddesses in Auradon? I could have sworn that one of my monsters killed a daughter of a god or something." She buried her face in her hands. "Promises. That's how Sinbad defeated me in the first place." She moaned. "Oh, how the mighty fall."

"I wouldn't trust your word lower than I can curtsey." Mal raised her eyebrow.

Eris hummed. "Interesting." She commented. "Then, pray tell, what is your plan?"

"We're here to seal up Tartarus," Ben told her. "You're never going to leave again.

Eris looked genuinely surprised. "Really? To be honest, I thought that the whole killing gods thing was a bit more straightforward than that." She disappeared and rematerialized in front of the two. Ben took Mal's hand and held on tight. "Don't you know only someone with sand powers can do that?" She asked.

Ben let a smile pull at the corners of his lips. "You're right." He agreed. "An impossible task."

Eris narrowed her eyes. She examined his appearance, and a smile pulled at her lips. "Oh, well, that's a surprise. You even have my daughter's signature." Eris hummed as black smoke began to billow out from around her. "Well, if you want to seal my home, you'll have to go through me first." She hissed. "And I already know that one of you is not as well as she claims to be."

Eris disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Mal and Ben looked around, but she did not rematerialize.

"You'll have to stitch the barrier together since your magic matches hers." Mal murmured. She couldn't explain it, but something felt weird about her feet. They felt numb. "I'll hold her off and over you."

"I'd rather it be the other way around." Ben frowned. "Wouldn't it be better to fight sand with sand?"

"And exhaust each other." Mal pointed out. "No. If I seal the barrier, I'll have to change the structure of the entire barrier before I can match my weaving. Otherwise, there'll be two types of magic, and they'll mix and eventually fall apart. I can do the failsafes, but not the bindings."

Ben exhaled. "Okay." He pulled her towards him using her hip and stole a quick kiss from her. His thumb rubbed a little circle closer to her stomach, which made not only her stomach but also her brain do painful flip-flops.

Ben let her go and began to quickly examine his sand powers. There were two parts to his magic.
One matched the makeup of the sands of Tartarus, and the other matched the nightmare horses. The first was imbued with chaos magic, and the second with fear magic. Unlike Ericka or Jessie, this magic seemed to be pretty evenly mixed. Perfect.

"Okay." He whispered. "I think I got it. But we still don't know where Eris is. Watch your back."

"I think I can find her," Mal whispered, looking around. Her stomach was still churning. "I'll just use the second realm and -"

The ground shook and Mal hit her knees. She covered her mouth to keep from throwing up. Ben managed to keep his balance, but barely. Above her head, a gigantic wave of sand was crashing down on her. She put her hands up to stop it but the ground shifted beneath her feet, and she fell. Immediately, sand covered her head and she was swimming in a sea of scratchy silt, reaching for a surface she couldn't even see. Sand filled her mouth, nose, ears, and eyes as she struggled, and she thought for a second that she was going to cough and suffocate in all the sand. Then something solid caught her hand. She was pulled back up into the light. Ben's hand returned from dissolved sand back to a solid form as he flung his hands skyward. Black sand appeared from his palms and rushed up to counter a second tsunami of gold that was raining down on them.

Mal's feet swished on the ground like she was on slippery ice as she tried to gain her footing in the rocking earth. She was still clutching Ben's sword tightly with one hand, but her first knife was gone. The second one was hanging from the sheath by the hilt. Her arms were cut up from when she'd been cut by her own blade in the angry sands.

As Ben's magic hit the waves, the golden wave diminished. However, several more were rising up on their left and right. Ben carefully planted his feet to guard her against the blasts and threw out his own massive wave of chaos magic. Two enormous tsunamis took form, growing taller as they traveled until they collapsed down on top of their opposers.

Mal managed to find her footing by using Ben's arm to help support her. The two stood, looking around at their surroundings as the sandy floor of Tartarus slowly stilled. For a second, the world went quiet.

"Did she go back to the Overland?" Mal gasped and coughed. A wave of actual sand fell out of her mouth.

"That'd make our job easy," Ben remarked, looking around carefully with a guarded look in his eyes. He moved his stance slightly so he could wrap a hand around her bicep. He carefully took his sword from her. "Get that knife off your arm before you cut your own wrist off."

Mal made a face at him. "Look at you, all authoritative." She snarled as she began to untie the last fastenings.

"Mal!" Ben yanked on her arm sharply as he pointed skyward, where a thick black color was spreading across the barrier to Tartarus. The sky was turning into an inky black. The floor started to rock again, and Mal hit her knees, narrowly avoiding chopping her middle finger into two equal parts. Sand sprayed up into the air as part of a massive sandstorm as the light from the barrier disappeared. The floor sands of Tartarus still gave off an ethereal golden glow, though the air was becoming thick with unnaturally colored silt. Mal grabbed Ben's leg as her own feet were dragged down into the silt. She could see his figure – head down, arms outstretched – as he tried to bend the sands to his will to near no avail.

She took a deep breath before her head began to be pulled down under the sands. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to keep her head up. Ben leaned down and yanked her out of the
earth. He'd re-sheathed his sword at his hip and was shaking against the strain of battling Eris's sands.

Mal struggled to get a hold on his shoulder so that she wouldn't slip back under and screamed to be heard over the roar of the storm: "Ben, absorb it!"

Ben held out the hand that wasn't wrapped around her and formed his own sandstorm in his palm. Then, he started suctioning their surrounding obstacle straight into his hand. It worked. The sandstorm vanished and everything was once again still.

Mal felt as drained as she had on the night that she'd nearly drained herself. She slumped against Ben's grasp, gasping, and cried in pain. Something was suddenly wrong with her side, where Ben's hand had been resting. Black steam was wafting from her side, and the protective, heavy duty fabric had melted away entirely. A bloody, singed wound in the shape of a man's large handprint was left. Ben swore.

"It's nothing," Mal waved him off as she gasped for breath. "You must have accidentally siphoned off of me or something, but really fast." She waved at her side until the steam subsided into a wound.

"You need to take to the air," Ben mumbled, anger ebbing from his tone. "This ground isn't going to cooperate with your legs, and you're unsteady anyways."

"You're the one who needs to take to the air." Mal made a face. "You have to stitch the barrier together before I can lock the fail-safes on Eris."

Ben put a hand on her shoulder. "Can you handle her?" He whispered.

Mal balled her fists up at her side and took Ben's sword out of his sheath from his hip. "I can." She resolved firmly. "Go on."

Ben kissed her cheek and dissolved from view. Mal yanked the last remnants of her sheath apart so she could wield her knife with her sword. She let her vision slip into the second realm as she quietly drew her wings out and lifted off the untrustworthy ground. Almost immediately, she spotted a tall, slinky shadow hiding from view in a form of invisibility cloaking. She shot a hand out to apprehend the goddess, but it seemed the invisibility was preventing her from sealing Eris's abilities. That or the goddess had learned to combat her tricks. Eris slipped into the sky, where Ben was now up on the roof, trying to seal the barrier.

Mal tried to summon fire but ran into two immediate problems. One, her conjuring wasn't that great to begin with. Two, only painful sparks were appearing in her hand. It was like her hand was being stabbed with dozens of tiny swords. At her feet, green staining was appearing in the sand – bleeding out of her like she was cut or something. It was just magical blending – powerful magic drew weak magics towards them, Tartarus was a lot more powerful than she was – but it was happening on the worst possible time. She needed to get off the ground.

Mal summoned every wit about her and launched into the sky. The moment she left the poisonous, untrustworthy sands, a little strength returned to her body. She pulled her wings out of nothing and followed Eris. Ben's blade began charged with green magic as Mal quickly caught up to the discord goddess. She slashed and cut Eris across her back. Eris howled and turned, which gave Mal just enough time to slash the blade through Eris's arm and throw her down towards the ground.

The black-haired goddess rematerialized into a solid form and procured a sword from her dark mists. It was a longsword, with a broad tip and sharp blades. Mal wiped the sweat from her brow
and the two charged at each other. Far up above, Ben continued stitching the barrier closed.

Eris tried to swing at Mal's legs but Mal saw the blow coming from a million miles away. She stopped the blow using the flat side of her blade and then used the momentum of her returning blow to switch Eris's weight against her. She ducked underneath Eris's right elbow as the goddess stumbled and pushed her down. Eris fell a few yards and returned with an envigored fury. She took a few sloppy throws at Mal's arms, driving the small girl back a few inches, and a one really good one at her neck that forced the young queen to duck or be decapitated.

Mal rose again and the two continued exchanging blows. Several times Eris tried to slip around Mal, but Mal would simply lock swords, push her down, and repeat. Eris might have been a goddess, but it was clear her swordsmanship was sloppy and out of practice. And it seemed Eris was realizing this as well. Mal cut a slash through the pale woman's cheek and Eris slipped back a few feet closer to the ground. Mal knew that if she hit the ground, it'd start sapping her strength again, but the closer the goddess was to her territory, the further she was from Ben. Far, far above them, the hole had shrunk to the length of a few people lying head-to-head. It was perfectly spherical and seemed to be shrinking every time Mal took a glance at it.

The sands turned black at Eris's feet as she touched them. With a scathing look at her, Eris sent the longsword up in a wave of smoke and instead summoned an arsenal of sand. Mal reached for the magic around her only to find it was brutally ripped from her grasp. She couldn't even throw up a shield to protect herself as the tidal wave of sand magic slammed into her and took her tumbling towards the sands. Blood and sand ran into Mal's left eye as she rolled and came to a skidding stop on the sands. Green staining followed her in a grotesque trail as she rolled. It was worse now. The longer she was here, the worse it'd be.

Mal rose again and the two continued exchanging blows. Several times Eris tried to slip around Mal, but Mal would simply lock swords, push her down, and repeat. Eris might have been a goddess, but it was clear her swordsmanship was sloppy and out of practice. And it seemed Eris was realizing this as well. Mal cut a slash through the pale woman's cheek and Eris slipped back a few feet closer to the ground. Mal knew that if she hit the ground, it'd start sapping her strength again, but the closer the goddess was to her territory, the further she was from Ben. Far, far above them, the hole had shrunk to the length of a few people lying head-to-head. It was perfectly spherical and seemed to be shrinking every time Mal took a glance at it.

Eris had immediately abandoned Mal and began to fly upwards towards Ben, who momentarily abandoned his work to conjure a thriving hurricane of black fear sand, which he sent hurtling towards Eris. Behind him, Mal thought she saw the barrier open a few inches wider. Blind panic set into her nerves.

Despite the magic being pulled out of her and the blood falling from her head, Mal felt her fingers begin to smoke as intense magic filled her. She could feel herself pulling, stretching, transforming as she grew into her dragon form, and then leaped into the air.

Eris and Ben had engaged in a battle of sands as she tried to force him out of the sky. But however great of a fighter Mal was, Ben was better and stronger. Eris was struggling to knock him down. Mal growled, and Eris turned at the sound. Her eyes grew large and her face fell slack as Mal swatted her out of the air. Ben immediately turned his back and began frantically working on the barrier.

As Eris fell, Mal conjured a great ball of fire that soared right towards the goddess. It sent her tumbling in a heap into the dunes of her own realm. The heat was so intense that the sands began to melt in a dizzying pattern of molten reds, glowing golds, and the thick sludges of the remnants of Ben's black sand magics. A large crater had appeared at the base of a large dune and was slowly filling with molten glass.

Mal let herself shift back into her human form with her wings and looked down into the depths of the crater. She didn't see Eris for a moment. Maybe she'd gotten trapped underneath the glass or the sands. She hovered a few inches over the sands. Despite the lack of contact, more green stains appeared under her feet.

There was an electrifying scream from down below. Mal felt every single one of her hairs rise up
The earth shook and a massive air suction from the crater almost pulled Mal down into its depths. She slammed into the sands painfully on her side. Tiny molten glass streams raked their way across her skin. A gigantic head rose from the hole, covered by charred, black, silky, flyaway hair. Two golden eyes with red cornea the size of King Adam himself appeared, followed by several more gigantic features that made up Eris, now a colossal foe that literally stole Mal's breath. That, or she'd swallowed another mouthful of sand. She honestly couldn't tell.

She didn't look good. She was on fire and bloody. Eris snatched her up and shook her with a snarl. "Will you stay out of my-" She began with a howl.

A large spinning disk of black sand appeared out of nowhere. It sliced a large gash across Eris's shoulder. Eris's hold loosened as she turned to howl at Ben, who was hanging off the barrier with one hand and a foot to hold his balance.

Eris snarled and flung Mal across the dunes. The moment she hit the sands rolling, she felt something horrible happen to her left arm and couldn't stop a scream from ripping its way out her throat. Her forearm down to her fingers felt numb and tingly and horribly, horribly useless. She couldn't move it.

Someone else landed in front of her. She looked up as Ben hit his knees beside her with panic in his eyes. He stared at her arm as it started to bruise over with shades of blacks, blues, and purples. Mal hadn't honestly known could appear on her skin.

"You have to leave," Ben urged her.

"What?" Mal gasped. She stared at him incredulously. If she left, he'd be alone. "No." She struggled to her feet. "Get back to work. I'm staying."

Maybe he tried to convince her. Maybe he tried to start with her name and a list of reasons why not. But she couldn't hear him as she re-summoned her dragon form. Eris was reaching up and trying to pry the barrier back open. Thankfully, she wasn't having much luck. Mal let loose another torrent of flame that lit Eris's dress on fire. Eris turned as Mal took to the skies again. Ben returned to the top and continued stitching the barrier closed.

Eris screamed as she tried to wrestle Mal the dragon away while simultaneously batting at the flames on her dress. Mal focuses on stoking the flames. Just because the sands weren't flammable didn't mean that they weren't melt-able. So as Ben slowly stitched the barrier as close together as he could without sealing him and Mal inside, Mal tried her best to force Eris into a deepening pit of boiling half-glass, half-sand sludge.

Her dragon skin seemed to protect her from the heat and her busted arm didn't seem to translate over into this form, but Eris's nails were ripping off scales and it was hard to move as glass stuck to her in huge sheets.

Eris slammed her elbow down on her head. Mal shook off the blow and blew fire into Eris's face. Eris broke away and used her legs to send Mal tumbling back over the sands once again. Mal got back up, prepared to go back to battle, and stumbled. The world around her suddenly got a lot bigger and warmer. She looked down and realized her hands were back. She'd inadvertently reverted back to her human form. The sands she'd tumbled across were bright, vibrant green with magical staining. She was out of magic. She couldn't maintain that form anymore.

Mal ran her good hand across her head. Her horns, which had been irretractable the last few weeks, had finally vanished as her body tried to conserve magic. She'd never used this much magic before, and now she was almost out.
Ben reappeared beside her in a cloud of black sand. "That's it!" He declared with a sense of victory, rushing to help her up. "Let's get out of here." Black sand whirled around him in dizzy, seemingly uncontrollable waves, though Mal knew he held perfect control of it. As he hurriedly helped her to her feet, being careful of her arm, the sands thickened until eventually, she couldn't see anything. A horrible feeling of dread settled into her spine as Ben used his fear sand. Ben made a gesture towards the direction they'd last seen Eris, and the cloud departed. It encircled the discord goddess, who tried to swipe it away. Eris's movements immediately became sluggish as she focused on trying to free herself from the horrible burning pools of glass.

"Can you fly?" Ben whispered, trying to find a way to immobilize Mal's arm against her side without hurting her terribly.

Mal's legs gave out from under her and her vision went dark. When she woke back up, Ben was shaking her, and she was lying on the ground. Her eyes felt sticky. She reached up and brushed blood off of her eyebrows. Oh, right, she was still bleeding from when Ben's sword had been blown into her.

"I'm okay." She gasped, feeling with her right hand for his shoulder. "Help me up."

"No, stay down!" Ben demanded, shaking in absolute panic. "You were just out for almost two minutes. Don't move!" He took several deep breaths and then carefully put her arms underneath her and picked her up. Mal shouted as her hurt arm swung back and forth. Ben muttered a bunch of terse apologies combined with more than a fair amount of swearing as he carefully secured her in his arms and dissolved his feet to help her up.

The pain combined with her bleeding was making her vision feel like an old television or radio system that wasn't quite calibrated to the correct station. She was fading in and out of consciousness. Ben floated her up to the barrier as Eris continued to struggle in her slowly hardening glass prison. "Can you still tie it shut?" He asked, carefully balancing her in his arms.

"I- might?" Mal gasped. Ben helped her to a half-standing position. She put her hands on the barrier and slowly began spelling the barrier shut based on Eris's closeness to the edge. If Eris came near the opening, it'd close. If she went away, it would open. Mal couldn't build a new section of barrier like Ben could, but she could spell what was already there. Mal kept her vision in the second realm as she worked and carefully monitored her magic as it grew thinner and thinner. Too much more, and she'd snap.

"Good job," Ben whispered when the last spell had been cast. "I knew you could do it." He squeezed her arm. Mal carefully wiped the last of the blood flowing from her head away and braced her hand against the barrier.

"I need you to help me up." Mal gasped as her eyes slipped into the back of her head for a few seconds and flickered before returning to their normal shades. Her limbs felt cold and one ear felt like it had gone deaf. She wasn't far from dead.

Ben nodded and released her. She immediately dropped a few inches to the ground but retained her hold on the barrier. He used his body weight to propel himself up and out of the hole. Ben braced his legs against the entrance of the seemingly-solid realm walls and pulled himself through the barrier. He reached back down through the hole as it suddenly constricted and took her hand. Below them, Eris let out a howl of rage and got to her feet. The fear sand's effects were slowly wearing off.

Ben leaned down to pull her up but was abruptly stopped by an invisible force covering the face of the hole. All of the blood drained out of his face. He tugged again, but Mal's hand refused to cross
the threshold of the chaos realm.

"No!" Ben whispered. "No, no!" He pulled sharply, with all his strength at Mal's arm, and she yelped in pain as her knuckles crashed against the invisible barrier. "Sorry." He apologized, reaching down with both hands to try and pull her out.

"Oh my gosh." Mal gasped as she stared at the barrier it seemed fuzzy still, to her. "It's closed. She closed it."

"She couldn't have closed it!" Ben protested. "We were battling her the entire time!"

"She must have closed it when she first saw us fall." Mal realized. That was why she hadn't immediately appeared.

"No, no," Ben muttered under his breath. "Mal, please!"

He continued to yank at her hands as Mal shook. The reality of their situation was crashing down on her. "Ben, she closed the barrier!" Mal snapped. Tears were filling her eyes. "I can't come through. Oh god, I can't come through."

Ben loosened his grip and the two stared at each other. She put her hands up as far as she could, and it was as if she was putting her fingers on a surface of glass. Ben pulled his hair as he panicked and Mal began to cry.

This was it? After all this? She couldn't accept that. Mal pushed her magic through her fingers and into the invisible barrier holding her back. It came visible; a glowing green area about two inches thick that was holding her back from him. She imagined it shattering and breaking, but nothing happened. The green only faded away to make the barrier invisible again, leaving her even more tired.

"I want to cause an explosion." She thought. "I want to blow this up." She closed her eyes and concentrated. A burst of energy appeared in her palm and launched her back a little. She caught the edge of the solid barrier with her fingertips and pulled herself up to see if she could pass now. She couldn't. Her hands were blackened, and the edges of her fingernails had been ripped off, but she still couldn't go through.

"Oh my gosh." Ben gasped, reaching down and catching her jaw. "Your eyes are flashing. Is that-"

"That's bad." Mal interrupted. She shook her head and pressed her forehead against the barrier to rest her head for a second while she thought. "It's no use, Ben." Mal gasped. Tears began to fall back towards the ground below. "I can't- there's no way. I can't come through."

"There's got to be a way," Ben begged. He looked all around at his dismal surroundings. "There's got to be something, anything. Maybe we can rebreak the barrier, maybe I can force you through-"

"Ben." Mal hissed, squeezing her eyes shut. "The only way out is for you to turn me into sand, and we both know that will end badly for one of us three."

Her words made them both stop. Mal looked up and met his eyes as his breathing stilled. While there was obvious pain in his eyes, relief was spreading throughout her. This was her chance. She didn't have to be pregnant anymore. It would be a viable excuse to Auradon and she'd have more time before she had to make this decision again.

"Let me," Ben begged, leaning down and taking her face through the barrier. "You're young. There will be more opportunities for you to get pregnant. You didn't even want it to happen now
anyway."

And just like that, she had regrets and doubts. Mal's face twisted and she looked away. "I don't know." She gasped. "This isn't a simple okay, Ben. Just because I didn't plan it doesn't mean I'd rather live knowing your baby died inside of me because of a decision we made."

"Mal," Ben whispered, running a thumb down her cheek. "Please."

Mal swallowed and looked back to where Eris was slowly starting to move faster. "Okay." She whispered. She heard Ben take a ragged breath.

"It's okay." He whispered as sands appeared at her feet. She swallowed hard. Shouldn't she be the one comforting him? "It's okay. You'll be okay."

The sands traveled up her legs. Mal squeezed her eyes shut, but it was no use. Tears still leaked out of her eyes. She pressed a hand to her midsection, wondering if she'd feel the moment they died. She wondered how that would affect her. The sands overtook her head and then vanished. Mal looked up. She was still underneath the barrier. Ben was looking down in rapt horror. She put her hands back up, and the barrier separated them still. "No!" He gasped. "No!" He slammed his fists down on the barrier.

"You can't dissolve me." Mal gasped. Her mind raced with a thousand reasons why. Maybe Eris had planned for that. Maybe Sinbad had been wrong. Maybe it was because she was magical herself or maybe it was because... she was pregnant. But then, the baby didn't have any power over her, and Marina had been able to be dissolved. Mal squeezed her eyes shut. It was her, she realized. Despite everything at stake, she couldn't let Ben kill the child he wanted so badly. Her magic wouldn't let her. Tears leaked out of her eyes, and she bit her tongue to keep from cursing her own name.

Ben dug his nails into his hands. "What can we do?" He begged. "Please, you've got to have a plan. You always have a plan. You've always come back to me before."

Mal put her hand on the barrier. Beneath them, Eris screamed in rage as she tried to pull free of her quickly-hardening glass prison. Angry white burns spread across her skin. "There's nothing else." She whispered. Her voice cracked. Her muscles sagged towards the ground, but she had to at least tell him she loved him. She had to at least say goodbye.

"Please, don't Mal." Ben bit his lip. "You – magic – anything is possible." He reached through the barrier for her hand and twined their fingers together as his shoulders shook. "We deserve a happily-ever-after, after all of this."

Mal shook her head. "I told you." She whispered. "Villains never get happily-ever-afters. Not even their children." She squeezed his hand and kissed his knuckles as Ben's eyes filled with tears. "Go back to Auradon, Ben," Mal begged him as her voice cracked. "I'll survive here as long as I can, but she'll catch me eventually. Please… I don't want you to see me die."

A heavy weight set into Mal's bones. This was it. She was going to take her last breaths here. She winced as Eris howled and ripped a section of hard glass off her upper arm, taking skin with it and leaving muscle exposed. Mal's stomach churned.

"No." Ben shook his head. "No, you're not going to die."

"Go." Mal urged him. "Go, please. You're free now. The curse is broken. Go back to Auradon. I don't want you to see me die. Audrey can take care of the kingdom until Madison is old enough to
take over that and the moors. Everything will be okay." She squeezed his fingers in a white, vice-like grip.

"No." Ben refused to believe her. "Don't say that. You're going to come back. You're going to be okay. You're the hero of our tale, and your name will go down as the greatest queen in history, right beside mine. We're going to have kids and rule the kingdoms and watch movies-" His voice broke. "I don't want anyone else." Ben wept. His eyes filled with tears that fell through the barrier, past Mal. He leaned down and kissed her one more time, one last time. "I'm staying." He told her and began to climb back down through the barrier. "I'd rather be with you in death than be without you in life."

Mal stopped him climbing down. She kept his face down by hers for a few more seconds, just so she could kiss him, long and slow like he'd taught her in the first place. "I'd rather you be alive." She told him. "I love you. Ben, you taught me what love felt like. No matter what anyone says, no matter what happens, you'll always be the hero of my tale."

Ben squeezed his hands as tears ran freely down his cheeks. He kissed both of her hands. "I will be back." He promised. "I'll bring the army, the navy, the cavalry, whatever Auradon, the Moors, the Isle, and the Overlands have. I swear to you Mal, I'll be back."

"Don't swear me that." Mal chided. "Just go home. It'll be okay."

"Hang tight," Ben commanded in a husky tone. "I'll return as soon as I can. I don't care if I have to rip through the laws of the universe and kill Eris with my bare hands, I won't let you die."

"Goodbye, Ben," Mal whispered. "It's been an adventure."

The two stared at each other for several seconds. Mal knew Ben was planning on coming back for her, but there was nothing more to be done. If he did return, he'd find her body and a cackling, insane Eris. This was the end of her rope. She squeezed his hands one last time and let go. He stood up and watched as she fell towards the grounds of Tartarus below. Just like before, she slowed before she hit the sandy bottom.

Far, far above her, she watched as Ben dissolved into a cloud of shadows and took off towards the Overland. No sooner had he left, Mal glimpsed a giant wave of sand falling down over her head. She could have stopped it or moved out of the way if she wasn't drained, but she was so exhausted that she couldn't even lift a finger to save herself. She couldn't even feel anything except pinching, drowning despair as she took in the last view she'd ever be gifted with in life, trying to remember what Ben's kiss had felt like on her lips as the sand covered her body, crushing her chest and forcing her last breath out of her lungs as her eyes rolled into the black of her head and everything went black.

Queen Maleficent's lifeless body was left buried under miles of sand, never to be found or recovered.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas! Epilogue out next week.
Big Thank you to my beta readers.
I know I said the epilogue would be out this week... and it will be! Right after Chapter 50. XD XD You're Welcome.

The End.

Not really, I just wanted to make you guys mad.

This has been an absolute joy for me.

I started working on this January 31, 2018. A literal year later, I’d picked up my first betas for this story. Originally, there were no battle scenes shown in the overland, the Core Four were featured five different times, and Chad had no character arc. Amazing, huh? You, the readers, and my beta readers inspired me to make those changes. Especially people like Brieva from A03. ❤️

Speaking of which:
pinksakura271 - I wish we could have worked together a little bit more, but I'm still very grateful for the errors you pointed out for me. Hope you are recovering well from the loss of your cat. Thank you for your careful reading, energetic spirit, and sweet personality.

Xez2003 - None of this would have been possible without you. Partnering with you has been amazing - I am so lucky that you reached out. I hope, when you look back over HRH, you can see your fingerprints all over it. The extra Bal scenes, Chad's character arc, everything. All of this is because of you.

More than a beta-reader or even a partner or Coworker, you've been a real friend to me. One of my goals is still to go back and look through all our D3 predictions and see what we got right. It's been a ride full of hardships and laughter and raw, pure strength. I have this sempiternal respect for you that knows no borders or bounds. You are strong. You are clever. You are courageous and hard-working and patient. I love your energy and your sweetness and all of the many talents you've shared with me. You hold so much sympathy for everyone around you and you are so observant and thoughtful; something I often forget to be. Your advice has proved purposive in both my writing and in my daily life. Yes, this story is what it is because of your countless hours, but I am the person I am because of your lasting friendship.

Writing this to you is hard. I don't know how to sum up everything that's happened in a year of partnership. I hope, at the very least, I've been half the friend that you've been to me. Please know I love you so much. On this spiritual level that I can't even describe, I feel like I know the way your soul is. Please know that I respect you. You have been both a wonderful student and a brilliant teacher. Please know that I am so proud of your accomplishments in your work, in your story, and in your life. You deserve nothing but the best.
I know I said the epilogue would be out this week... and it will be! Right after Chapter 50. XD XD You're Welcome.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Thanks for the adventure.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Mal breaks out of Tartarus. Ben becomes President of Exanton. The borders to the Isle are opened.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hours later, Mal woke up on her cheek with her right leg splayed out beneath her and her busted arm twisted almost entirely around her back. Every muscle was screaming in pain, even though she hadn't even moved anything yet. She rolled over, got to her knees, and threw up all over the cold sandy floor. Green flames spilled out of her mouth, making her gag. It was likely a magical sign that she'd overdone it, tenfold.

Mal had no idea how she was still alive, or how she was on top of the sands instead of Eris dragging her body out like she'd naturally assumed would happen. She had no idea where her enemy was, or what was about to happen to her. Everything was quiet, and she was alone.

For what felt like several hours, Mal lay on her back and stared up at the sky. She heard the wind on the sand nearby and watched the sky above. The sands around her were colored vibrant green with magical staining. The entrance to Tartarus had sealed completely, which meant that Eris was somewhere around here, and at full strength. She blinked as she watched the sky change colors, seemingly random, and slowly moved her hand over her stomach as she remembered what had happened. How Ben hadn't been able to save her.

What had happened while she was out?

Was she even pregnant anymore after that strain?

Mal was completely alone in the dead silence. She was aching and melancholy. Ben was gone. She was trapped. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to go. She was sitting in the open, waiting for Eris to happen upon her. Every muscle was taut, overworked, and sore. The end was surely near.

Mal forced herself to her knees. She felt sick again. She curled up around her stomach, closed her eyes, and wished to sleep forever. She knew it was inevitable that Eris would find her. Sooner or later, she would die. Eris would scatter her blood across the sands and the world would continue on without her.

She would be forgotten, eventually. After all, there was only so many times Auradon would recall the queen who'd ruled for a little more than a year. And the moors? They'd have Madison, and Madison would be around longer because now the world was out of danger. Belle and Adam would raise her to be good and who knows? Maybe Ben might decide to marry her once she got old enough. Probably not, since Ben had been hung up on her age difference with him after he'd married her, and they were five years apart, not twenty-three years. Maybe he'd marry someone else from the Isle who would take over her place? Or maybe a full-blooded Fae or Fairy from the moors. If he did marry a Fairy, maybe their children would have sand powers and wings.
Mal closed her eyes to shield from the light and tried to remind herself that it was inevitable and that Ben should get remarried after she was gone. That had always been the plan anyway.

Then, she rested her hand on her stomach and for the first time, let a little smile rest on her mouth. Still, they had had something amazing. They had created kingdoms and families and magic and life. She had a life inside of her.

It was a thought she'd considered, but never before had it come with such force to her mind.

Mal sat up a little taller and wrapped her good arm around her belly. Right underneath her ribcage and above her pelvis were the faintest signs of growth. The smallest hints that there was someone else inside her. Someone without a name, or even a gender. At this point, they'd scarcely be more than a plum-sized blob with fingers, toes, and a tiny little body, all their own. And while the chances seemed slim, something told Mal that they were very much still alive.

She was supporting someone inside her. If she died, they'd be gone too. No one would ever know what they'd have accomplished, and their story would be lost. It would be like if Ben had died before he and Mal had ever met, and she with him because her mother's curse would take her out. Nothing would have changed for the Isle, Audrey never would have learned what she could be, and the moors would have suffered and wasted away until the magic had been depleted and lost. Sure, Belle and Adam might have had another kid, like Ben might have another wife one day, but the story would have faded out and the curse left unspoken, never to be written or remembered.

Mal was no fool. She knew Ben would never forget her. How could he? She had barged into his life and been nothing like he'd expected. Everything she'd done had had an effect on him. It had been her he'd made out with on the balcony and her who'd walked down the aisle to him. Her who he'd given a portion of the kingdom and her who'd gained the moors with him by her side. She'd rescued him from Uma, her mom, and Gaston, and then once more from Helena. It had been Mal who'd gone against his parent's wishes and forced every ounce of poisoning out of his system and it had been her who'd helped him accept his magic. She was the first person he'd ever taken to bed and if she had any say in it, she'd also be the last. The poor boy would be lucky if he'd ever be able to go a day without thinking of her.

Mal rubbed her thumb over her belly. "Can you hear me?" She asked softly. Her voice sounded dry but soft. A warm feeling spread through her chest, like sunshine spreading over grass, and she finally felt something take root inside her chest. For the first time, she felt love wash over her in a wave so powerfully intense there was no denying it. Whatever was inside her and whoever they turned out to be, she loved them. Mal smiled and hugged herself tightly. "Don't you worry." She whispered aloud. "I've just decided that I don't want to make my grave here after all."

Mal got to her feet and looked around. Her arms had dried blood caked on them from where she'd incorrectly sheathed her knives and she was sorer than a lone thumb. A long scab had formed on her forehead where Ben's sword had sliced her open, and her busted left arm swung, sending stabs of pain up her arm. As she examined her surroundings, she was surprised to find the hilt of Ben's sword sticking out of the ground, as if it had always been there. It was almost as if someone had left it there for her to find. Mal sighed with relief as she pulled it out and ran her thumb over his name. The same old sword, the same old monster, and the same old battle.

She was here to win.

Mal rolled her shoulders. A cascade of sand fell out in an uncomfortable rain. She raised the sword and examined her eyes in the reflection. She tried to light them up, without looking into the second realm, and watched in horror as the green appeared, but flickered softly like a broken light. She was still drained. The staining of Tartarus had stolen almost everything from her. Her horns had even
faded from atop her head as her body tried to reserve strength. She didn't even have enough to fly out, and the barrier might still be sealed.

The sheath for Ben's sword was gone, so Mal braced it in one hand and began a trek up the sand dunes of Tartarus. The sky had taken on intense shades of reds, blues, and purples. Mal brushed the sand out of her hair and marched onwards. She had no idea where she was going, but she couldn't fly quite yet without seriously hurting herself magically.

As she came upon a dune, she looked up and spotted a river of golden glass that was running through the hills. She smirked. Bingo.

When she caught a glance of the sky, she noticed that the entrance had appeared. Interesting. Maybe she hadn't seen it before.

Mal followed the river down through the dunes. She didn't walk on it because she could still feel the heat vibrating from it, and parts of the center of the river didn't look entirely solid, but it acted as an excellent way-finder to the epicenter of the storm.

The glass river turned into a massive lake with gooey sections and rough edges when the sand had been pulled back as the glass hardened. It was smooth on the surface, with not a single blemish. Eris had obviously not been here yet.

Mal continued onward, working against her exhaustion and sore body as she skirted around the edge of the lake and over bits of stray glass that had melted down the hills from the extreme heat. As she came over the next bluff, her mouth dropped open in shock at the ruined landscape before her.

Deep chasms forever held in place by glass had been torn into the landscape. At the bottoms of some, she could see the black stone city, which must have been the beginnings of Tartarus before it had been filled with sand and transformed into an extra-worldly realm. Large sculptures of thin glass stretched around the chasms like the fingers of some demented figure that was trying to rise from the sands below. Long rows were in every direction where Eris had clawed at the ground to get out, and a large handprint about twice Mal's size had broken a portion of the glass into a thousand shards.

Mal hiked to the edge of a chasm and looked up and down the length of it. To her right side, down a deep valley, she saw grey skin sticking out of an array of colorful shattered glass. She began to make her way there.

It was Eris, in a horrible condition. Her dress and a large majority of her skin had been burnt away, letting Mal see a great more of the discord goddess than she'd ever wanted to see. A lot of Eris's hair was charred too. Mal wasn't too worried about the state of the goddess, however. Most of the burns were clearly healing at an extensive rate. It was probably the reason the goddess was asleep in the first place. Now, as Mal stood above her, she had to figure out what to do.

She needed to get out of here. That much she knew. The only way she could get out was if Eris opened the borders or if someone with sand powers transported her out, which would kill her baby. Mal stifled a groan. The chances of Eris agreeing to open the borders were minuscule, considering they'd ruined Tartarus and sealed her inside. And even if Eris was willing, Mal didn't want to know what the payment would be for that. If only she could turn into a dragon and... transport herself out.

Mal looked down at the sleeping woman. If she wanted to do this, it would have to be a split-second decision, before Eris woke up. Mal huffed and readied her sword above Eris's neck.
Admittedly, a knife would be better, but she would rather keep the sword on hand, and her knives were gone.

Mal tried to move her broken arm and felt stabs of pain shoot up her nerves. She clamped down on her tongue and willed her fingers to twitch. It was hard to do much else. She swallowed and carefully moved her arm to rest on Eris's neck, hoping beyond hope she wouldn't wake. When she'd done this with Ben, she'd used his heart, but considering Eris's current state, she felt like the neck was an equally good place to try from.

Mal lowered her vision into the second realm. She immediately got a headache, and her vision flickered. She knew she couldn't maintain this for long, lest she pass out again. She stared at the Magic inside of Eris. It was thick and gold, like lava twisting under Eris's immortal skin, and of a brighter, more concentrated quality than Mal had ever seen. By all means, Eris should have defeated her, easily. Mal had a feeling that it was only the shock of the dragon and Mal's desperation that had kept her alive.

Mal started to will the magic out from under Eris's skin, the opposite of what she'd done with Ben's. As golden sand magic spilled into her veins, she did her best to keep it contained to her arm, though it wanted desperately to taint the magic already in her body and transform it. Mal's arm trembled with the strain, but the effect was immediate. Mal's arm strengthened and took on strength, and Mal's vision stabilized. Still, Mal resisted stealing too much of Eris's magic. She knew that, just like Ben had become magical from too much borrowed magic from Mal, she could become an immortal with too much magic from Eris.

Eris's eyes opened as she felt something begin to siphon off of her. She was delirious from pain and exhaustion, but quickly coming back to reality. As she opened up her mouth and began to move, Mal brought the sword down on her neck. It pierced about halfway through and stopped as though an iron force was prohibiting it. Mal knew she was running out of time, but there was a steady collection of gold sand magic in her arm now, and she was growing stronger by the second. She just had to time this right, and she might be able to get out before Eris murdered her.

As Eris waved her hands and began to struggle to her feet, Mal willed her wings to her and took off, flying towards the skies. The sword remained firmly in her grip. She had no doubt that Eris was only stunned, and that she would be fine. However, the sands were rising up from the floor again, and this time they didn't have two targets to split attention between. Mal bit her tongue and shot for the opening in the world, which was growing closer and closer together as Mal rushed to the exit.

She slipped through just as it closed, meaning that Eris now had enough power to follow her. And follow her she had. Mal glimpsed a stream of dark energy on her tail, which crashed into the closed barrier. Fists covered in black blood began to beat the window as Mal dropped to her knees and poured everything she had just stolen from Eris back into the barrier. Purple appeared where her hand touched, as vibrant and colorful as her hair. The color raced across the barrier to Tartarus, and Mal knew in her gut that there was no way in, and no way out. Eris was sealed inside, where she'd be alone in her kingdom for eternity after she'd healed, and Mal was outside, free, and alive. Her arm grew weak again, and her vision faded back to normal.

She sighed in relief and sat down on the barrier, even as Eris continued to howl and beat and scream at the barrier beneath her. As she caught her breath, she looked out to sea and saw dozens of shadows racing towards her over the sea. An entire fleet of ships of every kind, with people screaming as they approached. Mal returned to her feet, lifted her wings, and took off. The boats slowed as they saw her coming and people began to shout and cheer. Mal spotted a sandy-haired man in a blue suit standing at the head of a ship. She flew towards him and landed on the bow of
the ship.

For several seconds, she and Ben said nothing to each other. He was crying openly. She felt tears coming on herself. The others on the ship, which included Bunny, North, Toothiana, Astrid, Hiccup, Sandy, Jack, Ericka, and others said nothing as Mal took a few breathless steps towards him.

"I thought I was saving you?" He croaked.

Mal dropped the sword and ran to put her arm around him. He caught her and pulled her clear off the ground, pressing kisses to her hair and ear since her head was in the wrong direction. She giggled and gave him a sweet peck on his lips even as tears slipped down her cheeks. "You shouldn't have counted on me waiting around." She hiccuped in a hushed tone.

Ben laughed. "I'll never place that bet again." He swore, wiping his eyes and sobbing in relief. She buried her fingers into his hair, and they both slumped to the deck together, sobbing.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," a cool voice came from the doorway. Mal looked up. She wasn't at all surprised to see who it was. Somehow, she'd known she'd be hearing from the family enchantress soon. Despite the fact it was high noon in the Overlands, thousands of miles away from Auradon and with a celebratory end-of-war event happening in a few minutes, Mal wasn't surprised to see her here.

"Not really," she invited her in with a gesture. "I'm just finishing getting ready. Come on in."

Agathe swept into the room and took a seat on a chair as Mal pinned two earrings into her ears and combed her hair into place. "I have a question," she began softly. "You gave me a prophecy that I would die. You said I would know what it is like to die of magical poisoning."

"Don't you?" Agathe asked. "Didn't you and Ben share those memories?"

Mal paused. She shrugged a little, and turned to examine herself briefly in the mirror. She was wearing a dress for once - something long and green that curved around her belly and made her look a little further along than she was. "The way Ben was acting - I think you told him things too. I think that's why he was so afraid."

Agathe only tilted her head to the side, so Mal turned to meet her gaze. "Would you like to know what I think?" She asked. "I think that your prophecies are subjective. I think that while you can see the future, you don't know what will happen. That's the true danger of prophecies. You see something, you think you know what it means, so you tell someone and they live in fear because of it. But then you can be wrong, and could have misinterpreted something entirely."

Agathe nodded. "I was so surprised to hear you were alive," she admitted. "I saw that you had fallen into Tartarus. That you were trapped and the sands were draining you away. You should have died."

"My moorland gift saved me," Mal explained. "I finally figured it out. It's somewhat ironic, in hindsight."

Agathe raised an eyebrow as a little smile spread across her mouth. Mal sat down beside her. "Magical sickness," she explained. "I can't contract it. Somehow, despite the fact I almost drained myself saving Ben, took away a girl's magic and voice, and was trapped in Tartarus, I never got it. It keeps me from dying from loss of magic or bad magic. The moorlands helped me grow the first few months I went, but this is beyond that. My blessing is that my magic doesn't turn against me."
"But you can turn against it," Agathe nodded. "You saw that happen when you attempted death magicks. You almost destroyed your own magic."

"If I'd have gone through with it, it would have been the opposite of magical poisoning. My magic would have fizzled out and died," Mal finished. She looked at Helena expectantly. "You had hints, though. You saw Belle with a baby boy. One of my future sons, I presume?" She put a hand to her frame. "And something tells me you saw something else. Something you haven't shown me. Something important."

Agathe looked touched, impressed, and astounded all at once. She traced Mal's features with a grin that spread across her cheeks. Her eyes were bright. Then she held out a hand, as if for a handshake. "You'll need this," she promised. Mal examined her hand. Something told her this was the last time she'd ever see this woman again. Everything was done. She'd survived her fairy tale.

Mal shook her hand. An explosion of color and sound roared into her brain. And a smile spread across her face. Agathe released her after a moment and stood up. Mal followed.

Agathe curtseyed to Mal, dipping her head forward in the most solemn show of respect Mal had seen. She curtseyed in return though she felt a little silly with the gesture, and then turned back to the mirror to pretend nothing had happened at all while Agathe swept out of the room and out of her presence for the last time. She remained that way until another figure appeared in the doorway. This one was wearing a suit, a crown, and a smile that made butterflies arise in her stomach.

"Hey," Ben whispered, linking his arm through hers. "Are you ready?"

Mal nodded with a smile and together they went out of the room and down towards the courtyard. A snow portal was open, and people were climbing through, into the portal. Ben and Mal followed.

They appeared in Syracuse, in the place where Mal had battled Eris and Helena. Everything was already starting as Ben and Mal took their places.

"The last villains have surrendered," North announced, smiling sideways at Ben and Mal as they sat together on a bench on the side of the room. The castle was filled with everyone - all of the war leaders, the overland and Auradon and Moorish soldiers, citizens of both countries, and people from Auradon who were important to both Ben and Mal. While broadcasting wasn't quite possible yet, the event was being filmed to be shown to Auradon later on. North stood at the head of the room - he had been a major war leader for forty long years and had a loud voice that required no microphone. On one side stood the other Overland leaders and on the other, Belle, Adam, Ben and Mal. Ben kept a steady arm around Mal's back as she leaned her head on his shoulder.

"We will be sending everyone to the nation of the Isle of the Lost," North continued. "After five years, they will have the opportunity to request residence in the city of Utopia there, but they will never be allowed to leave. Queen Mal will oversee them for the rest of their days."

Mal leaned her head on Ben's shoulder. She would be improving the darker Isle as well - the villains deserved a little punishment, not to live the way she'd been raised. She and Ben both agreed - clean things, good things, and things to work with would be sent. Auradon's trash problem would henceforth be solved by magic and careful planning ahead. Nature magic did wonders for non-biodegradables.

"The war has ended and as it stands, we are in need of renewal ourselves," North announced to the room. "Auradon thankfully set up a wonderful example for us forty years ago. We will divide the land by the stories of the old world. However, the King of Auradon and we have discussed the issues thoroughly, and we will not be running under monarchies or dictatorships. Instead, each
region will have a council of members - one for every thousand that live under them while our
numbers are still small. And each region will appoint one person to a higher council with one
president-king or queen at the head of it. They will need to be someone good, someone kind,
someone who already has experience renewing countries and saving people. We need someone
with an explicit destiny to rule and to reign."

North turned and looked toward Ben and Mal with a smile. The words 'explicit destiny' rang in her
head... wasn't that from her Auradon Coronation blessings? Mal's smile dropped off her mouth and
she furrowed her brow in confusion before looking up at Ben. Ben was smiling down at her. Her
blood ran cold. "Wait!" She sputtered. "Me? No, I can't do three kingdoms! I only have time for my
two!"

Been burst into laughter. "Not you," he assured her with a smile. "Me. They already asked me."

Mal stared, open-mouthed for several seconds before she leaned back with a small nod. "You said
yes?" She asked softly.

"I did," Ben nodded. He stood up and then knelt in front of her, taking both of her hands. "Will you
support me in this, Queen of Auradon, the Isle, the Moorlands, and Exanton?"

"Exanton?" Mal repeated slowly. Something clicked in the back of her head.

"It's an old word," Ben whispered. "From the Moorlands. It means-"

"All good things here," Mal exhaled. She squeezed Ben's hands. "What about Auradon?"

"You took a lot of work away from me," Ben laughed. "And now that we have councils in lieu with
the monarchies, I'll have even more time. So when you're at the palace for the Isle, I'll be there
with you. And when you're at the Moorlands, I'll be up here. Auradon will be passed on in twenty-
two years, but I'll reign here until you've passed on both of your kingdoms. Then we'll retire
together."

"I am not having four children, Ben," Mal declared immediately.

Ben laughed. "This is an elected position," he told her. "My successor will also be elected. Not
begotten."

Mal blinked slowly and then glanced past Ben. All of Auradon, Exanton, the Moors, and everyone
was waiting for this. Their decision. Her decision. She smiled and let go of Ben's hands to put her
hands on Ben's cheeks. "Okay. Go fix them, Ben," she whispered.

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her quickly before he stood up and then turned towards North.
Someone started clapping in the front row. Slowly, people joined in until a thundering crescendo
was echoing off the walls and people were screaming, shouting, celebrating and crying. Ben shook
North's hand, then went down the line, shaking hands with Hiccup and Astrid and Bunny and
Sandy and Tooth and everyone. Jack was down in the crowd with Elsa, Ericka, and Jessie.

As Ben circled back to hug his parents, Mal got back to her feet. After he'd released his mom, he
pressed his forehead to hers briefly before he returned to the center of the stage and knelt in front
of the crowd. The clapping ceased.

North held his right hand above his head. "All in favor of electing King Benjamin of Auradon to
the post of President of Exanton, please extend your right hand."

Across the room, thousands of hands went up. A sea of different colors and different types of
hands. One soldier held up a stump with tears streaming down his face. North cleared his throat. "Any opposed?" He called.

Mal was sure that somewhere there would be someone against it. But her own tears were so thick that she couldn't tell if anyone voted against him.

"Let it be!" North's voice boomed across the room. "King Benjamin of Auradon, the Moorlands, and the Isle of the Lost. Hero of Tartarus. Defender of worlds. President of Exanton."

North glanced over to Mal. "It would be fitting," he began with his voice strained and his accent thick. "For someone close to him to ordain the post. Would you?"

Mal exhaled and nodded. She stepped forward, behind Ben so he was still facing the crowd, and set her hands on his head. "Is there anything specific you want me to say?" She asked with a little chuckle.

Ben tilted his head up to laugh at her. "Make it count," he advised. Mal chuckled, smoothed his hair down, and then took a deep breath. The room fell deathly silent.

"Benjamin Florian Benson," she began, keeping her voice as steady as she could. "As you accept this call to lead the people of the new country of Exanton as the President, I, your wife, sustain you in this endeavor. You will do much good up here, and the experiences you have already gained will guide you to do all that is needed to see this country to success."

Pictures flashing in front of her eyes. She smirked. "Auradon has grown stronger under your care and will continue to do so. Your ideas about councils and committees have set a foundation that will build Auradon into an accepting, peaceable community. Don't be fooled though - there's still lots of work you need to finish.

"Exanton is more like the Isle than you think. Your compassion will be key to leading up here. Remember what the people have lost - you need to create more than a government, more than cities and schools and legislators. You will need to rebuild hope.

"Your parents are getting older, but they'll still be around for many, many years. Madison will grow up to be someone wild and vivacious. And while she won't stay in the palace and will choose a different path than the life of politics we've selected, she'll always look up to her brother-in-law."

Mal paused, sorting through all the pictures she'd seen. She knew now, why the Enchantress had said she'd need this information. She could see Madison smiling, painting, dancing before her eyes. She could see Audrey and Jay and Evie and Carlos. She could see Ben with grey hair and a beard growing across his chin (she could get used to that) and could even see herself getting older.

"Our kids are going to love you," she promised him. "One day, when they're talking about us, they'll say 'I don't know how, but Dad always knew how to be a parent'. Our sons are going to look like you, and our daughter will have your magic. It'll go by fast, so don't blink. One day, you'll be putting our baby on the throne of Auradon. One day, you'll be passing this throne on to someone else's baby who isn't even born yet. One day, when you're not king anymore, you'll be able to understand the gratification of all you've done. King Benjamin, there is no one else better suited for this role you have to play. You are the person you always dreamed you could be."

Ben looked up and smiled at her. Tears were forming in his eyes as he got back to his feet and swept her off of hers.

North offered them a ride back to Auradon in his sleigh, complete with no seatbelts, a snow globe
portal, and a large mug of hot chocolate for everyone. Ericka, Jack, North, Sandy, Bunny, and Tooth, who were the original clan of guardians over the land before Astrid and Hiccup had gotten in traverled with them. Apparently, there had also been other members of the war council, but they had died or quit over the years. Eep and Guy, Stoic the Vast, King Gristle JR, and others.

Snow was falling on the coast of Auradon when they appeared over New Orleans and began the flight over Andalusia and the Great Wall of Northern Wei. As they approached the mountains, North took a small detour. They passed over Avalor and within minutes could see Arendelle on the banks of the River Ure.

Erika frowned when she saw her hometown. "Why are we here?" She asked.

North flew the sleigh down. It was twilight and people were outside. As they saw the sleigh pass overhead, children squealed, and adults stood, gaping with wide eyes.

The sleigh flew over the gates to the palace. The entire royal family was outside, running around in the snow as Queen Elsa conjured not-so-secret snowflakes to add to the natural mix. When the sleigh appeared, everyone shouted and squealed. Kristoff rushed in front of Anna, who was holding a sleepy Kaitlynn and braced himself for an attack. Queen Elsa stood with a dangerous glint in her eyes as the sleigh lowered to the ground and settled. "Who goes there?" She commanded sharply.

Shouts came from inside the palace as Guards filled the courtyard from outside the gates and inside the castle. Ericka stood up. "Calm down!" She cried. "It's just us!"

"Ericka?" Elsa asked, alarmed. "Where have you been?"

Ericka didn't say anything. She glanced sideways at Jack for help, but he wouldn't give her any. He was still hiding from the view of Elsa and his family, even as little Jessie stumbled towards the sleigh, leaving icy frost flakes on the ground where she walked.

"Go on, Ericka." Jack hissed after several long, silent seconds. "Go back to your mom."

North climbed out of the sleigh and scooped Jessie up into his arms. "Oh, don't run off too far, now! Best to stay by your mom." He tickled her belly and nudged her back to Elsa. "We apologize for dropping in, but Jack asked us to see Princess Ericka back home safely. We are on our way to return the King and Queen of Auradon to their place in the palace."

"Jack?" Elsa asked vaguely.

Ericka's mouth dropped open. "You did this?" She turned to Jack. "Why?"

"You don't belong in war." Jack jumped up. "And it's over now, so you might as well go back home. This is where you belong!"

"Why are ye so against her being out, ya gombey?" Bunny asked as he surfaced from where he'd been pressed into the sleigh. Abigail gasped as she saw the large pooka stand and jump from the sleigh. "She's talented, and she really helped a lot with gathering up our baddies. Come 'round any time, ya fair dinkum." He said, patting Ericka's hand as he helped her out of the sleigh.

"This is where you belong, Ericka," Jack said, more forcefully.

"This isn't where I belong!" Erick exploded. "Don't you see? I'm more like you. I use a staff and can fly and I've never had the same type of magic as Mom. You know I don't belong in Arendelle, I'm a snow spirit!"
"Ericka," Elsa said, walking towards her daughter. "Calm down now, please."

"Yes, Ericka, calm down," Jack said, looking at his companions carefully. "You're going to be queen one day. You can't just run from responsibility whenever it comes your way."

"Well, maybe I'm more like you than you think," Ericka spat. "I'm twenty-one, when are you going to stop treating me like a child?"

"When you start acting like an adult!" Jack floated down in front of her with his hands in a vice grip on his staff.

"I am acting like an adult! I'm taking responsibility for my own life! And you would know about being forever young and running from responsibility! How many times were you there when I was growing up?" Ericka poked her finger on Jack's chest as she got closer and closer to Jack, but he refused to withdraw.

"I was there when I could be!" He yelled. "I'm sorry if a war that ended up spanning two continents and four countries wasn't a big enough reason to not live in the palace with you guys!"

"What is going on?" Bunny asked softly, just enough for the sound to reach Mal's ears. Mal sighed and sank into Ben's arms with her hot chocolate warming her fingers.

"Enough!" Elsa snapped. "Ericka, you need to calm down. Think about how you're conducting yourself."

"I'm no queen." Ericka spat. "I'm not like mom, Jack. You can't get the better of me like that. I'm just like you!" She stabbed her lemon staff into the stones of the courtyard. "Mal was right!" She snapped. "And I shouldn't be queen. I'm not meant to be queen! Since the day I was born I was made to be something else – a nieves!" The moment the word slipped out of her mouth, her eyes changed color. They took on an even lighter, icier blue than either Elsa or Jack's. A light appeared at the base of her feet and of her staff. It traveled up her, changing her clothes and leaving an unreal, waxy substance on her skin. Ben and Mal stood up to better witness what was happening.

Ericka was now clothed in fishnet stockings that took the shape of snowflakes, and boots that ended at her knees and were capped with fur. She wore a short skirt with matching fur hems and beautiful glittery embellishments on smooth, soft, white material. A beautiful coat had appeared made of matching fabric with matching fur embellishments on her collar, hems, and cuffs. Icy blue material accented a pocket on her left breast and the elbows on either of her sleeves. More glitter embellishments lined the sides of the fastenings on her coat, and a pair of furry earmuffs covered her ears atop her braid, which had gained five strands and had snowflakes sitting in it.

Ericka shook her head and blinked as if the world had changed before her eyes. Her eyes focused on her parents before her. "I'm leaving. I'm a snow spirit. I'm not a queen, I'm a-"

"Immortal." Mal breathed, completely awestruck.

Elsa seemed to have grown ten years. "Immortal?" She whispered.

"Yes." Ericka nodded. "That's why I always felt so out of place here. Let Jessie have the kingdom when she gets older. She's more like you. She can already control her magic the way you do, rather than me, who spent her whole life trying to learn your way and..." Ericka shrugged. "never got it."

Elsa sank to the ground in shock.

"H-hold on." Bunny sputtered. "What just happened? You can't just say you're immortal, your
mom is clearly a mortal queen. You'd have to have at least one parent who's never gonna die and-

"Me," Jack admitted softly as he gave up his argument and walked past Ericka to Elsa's side. "It's always been me."

Bunny's mouth dropped open in shock. Mal observed the rest of the courtyard. None of the royal family was surprised much by the revelation, obviously, but many of the guards exchanged wild, panicked looks. Sandy had three ebbing dots above his head as he tried to process what was going on. Tooth looked absolutely brokenhearted.

"Jack," North whispered. "This is where you fly to? You fathered kid with a mortal, Auradonian woman?"

"Two." Mal corrected automatically as she waved to Jessie, who had observed her sister's transformation into an immortal snow spirit and simply gone back to playing in the snow.

Jack helped Elsa to her feet without a word. "I love her." He whispered. "I'd make her immortal if I could."

Elsa was slowly regaining her color, taking in everything with wide eyes. "Well." She stammered. "I think it's better this way." She kissed Jack's cheek and the two let their hands swing between them. "Ericka has her place, something we've both wanted for years, and you're both home safe. Jessie and I will die someday, but now you'll never be alone. You'll always have your daughter, Jack, and she's got more of me in her than she likes to admit."

Ericka blushed sheepishly and smiled. Jack nodded, looking melancholy, and Jessie wandered over. Elsa swung the small child into her arms with a bright smile.

Mal slipped out of the sleigh as she downed the rest of her hot chocolate. "You guys all have lots to catch up on." She said, putting her mug down inside the sleigh. "How about Ben and I finish the journey by ourselves? You can stop by afterward if you want."

"Sounds good to me," Ben said, jumping down to be with her.

"You sure you don't want an escort?" Jack asked hesitantly.

"Nah." Mal shook her head. "Have fun with the family. You've got lots of explaining to do to your pals." She kissed Jessie on the head and hugged Queen Elsa. "Take care." She said.

As she passed Ericka, Mal paused. "There's not much left to say." She smiled. "I'm glad you found your place, but this isn't the end. Your parents are part of who you are, and I hope that, as the years pass and as time flies, you remember everything. There may come a time you return here and…" Mal spread her arms. "Mom and sister aren't here anymore, but great-great-great nieces and nephews are." A pained look crossed Ericka's face at those words, and she looked over Mal's shoulder at her mom. "You've got to learn not to look back." Mal cautioned. "Live in the moment, treasure all the time you spend here. And I hope you're happy with your new place in the cosmos. You know, everything will turn out fine in the end."

Ericka nodded and sniffled. Mal shared a hug with the forever twenty-one-year-old. Then she stepped back and returned to her own favorite place in the cosmos – right next to her husband, Ben. He took her hand with a smile and let go before he dissolved into a storm of sand. Mal laughed as her trusty wings grew around her, sheltering her from the snow. With one last wave, but not a backward glance, they disappeared towards Auradon.
"I set things up in here," Ben announced, swinging open the door and then stepping back to wring his hands as Mal stepped into the nursery. The walls had been repainted white and curtains in a deep shade of blue strung up in front of the window. She examined the crib and the new dresser and chair. "What do you think?" Ben asked as she ran a hand down the wall.

"It's missing some things," Mal shrugged. "I mean… babies in Auradon have toys and things, right? And there's not much decoration in here yet."

"I was hoping I could convince you to add your touch?" Ben asked, leaning against the doorframe nervously.

Mal spread her arms to the wall which the crib stood against. "I think we should customize this wall," she said to him. "I want to paint something on it… something like the murals in the library, but for children. Maybe I can make a collage of dozens of different tales so that it looks pretty while they're young and then as they get older they can realize what they missed before."

"You can do that," Ben nodded. "I think she'd like that a lot. Will you put us up there?"

"I don't know," Mal replied. "They're going to grow up hearing so much about us… do we want to overshadow them with our mess?" Ben shrugged.

Mal dragged a hand along the top of the dresser. "You keep calling them a girl," she laughed. "What happens if they're not?"

Ben sighed. "Well, see, I actually got a prophecy from our family enchantress. She said Auradon's princess would secede the throne."

Mal raised her eyebrows. "How does that dictate this baby being a girl?" She asked.

"Because she gave me the prophecy that you'd die along with it. So, well, I assumed that it meant that…" Ben fumbled over his words, looking increasingly cross as he tried to form his thoughts.

"Madison is an Auradon Princess," Mal reminded Ben, leaning against the dresser. "And I told you in your blessing that our daughter would have your magic. That means it can't be this one. You couldn't have sired someone with sand magic before you got yours."

Ben huffed and crossed his arms. "I didn't really think of that," he admitted. He glanced around the room. "I guess it's a good thing I decided to just stick with blue, huh?"

"If you'd have done pink, we would have had words," Mal reminded him, narrowing her eyes. "I refuse to allow you to brainwash any child of mine - girl or boy - into… into an 'Old Audrey' lifestyle!"

Ben burst into laughter and gathered her into a hug. She tensed up briefly and then allowed her arms to settle around his neck with a sigh. He looked down at her, then around at the room as he let his hands slide down her sides. "You don't seem angry anymore," he whispered in her ear. "I was worried that you wouldn't like it in here and that you wouldn't want to have anything to do with it."

Mal hummed and turned back around to look at everything. The crib against the wall, the stained dresser, and the comfy chair. It was so strange to think that this was her life now - after everything. "Something happened to me when I was alone in Tartarus," she admitted. "I can't even describe it… I was thinking about everything and how much everything has changed and what we did together, and I felt this connection."

She turned back to him. His eyes were focused, but fogged over with emotion. "I did this with you,"
Mal continued, twisting her ring on her finger. "And I built my kingdoms with your help and you're building yours with mine. That was our war and the Isle was our mission and my life has been streamlined with yours. I wouldn't have it any other way, now or forever. And so while I'm afraid and uncertain and yeah, I still feel a little cheated, I'm proud of what we've done together." She put her hands to her belly. "I'm proud of our family. And I want everything with you."

"I want everything with you too," Ben said, smiling and gathering her into his arms again. He kissed her hair.

"Oh my goodness! Look at all of this!" Someone exclaimed behind them. Mal turned and began to laugh when she saw the crowded hallway outside. Audrey slipped inside, holding Madison and looking excited to see the tiny room around her. Behind her, Evie, Jay, and Carlos were stepping in, laughing as they hugged Mal.

"It's been forever!" Mal exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Evie.

"You're the one who vanished off the face of the earth!" Carlos laughed. "Where have you been?"

"I've been keeping Ben on his toes," Mal replied, leaning over to shove Ben's arm good-naturedly. She released Evie and turned to hug Jay instead. He still smelled familiar - smoke and sweat and leather and all things Isle. She hoped he'd never change.

"Someone has to," Audrey laughed. "The guy becomes complacent after a while."

Ben rolled his eyes at their teasing but continued looking absolutely overjoyed as he cast his eyes over them, glancing over his family and friends. Audrey passed him Madison and Ben's face split into a look of combined excitement and love as he tossed her into the air above his head with a shout that made the little five-month-old giggle and smile. She babbled incoherently: "Abu-ab-ha!" and then stuffed her tiny fist into her mouth.

"It's great having everyone back together," Audrey sighed, finally butting into the circle and picking Mal up with a hug that she wasn't sure would leave bruises around her ribcage or not. "All we need is the new royal baby and we'd be complete."

Mal blinked as she was set back down. A slow smile spread across her mouth as she thought. "Actually," she hummed slowly, taking Audrey's shoulders. "There's a few more people. Let me step outside. I need to call Eliza."

"This is good."

"This is good."

Mal glanced over at Ben about the same moment he ripped his eye off of the view in front of them to smile at her. All around them, people were bustling. Ship hands were rushing to prepare the docks for people to arrive. Three ships were pulling in, so close that they could see the people on them. Ben raised an arm to wave as overjoyed shouts filled the air, both from the visitors on the ships and from the Auradonians waiting to receive them.

Across the ocean, the barrier of the Isle still stood tall and proud, but it was now permeable. It was time to make things right. Time for new beginnings. Time for forgiveness. Mal had changed the borders. For the first time in the last forty years, people were now allowed to go back and forth at will. There were still conditions - you couldn't stay in one land more than two weeks at a time and Mal's Isle barrier recorded everyone who went in or out, so you couldn't abandon one country for the other without the magic putting you back where you belonged once your visiting time was up,
but they were going to work out a system of immigration between the two. The Isle, now a beautiful utopia with fresh air and a beautiful beach and protection against all wrongdoing, was suddenly a Real Estate hotspot. Warnings still existed as well - the entrance to the old Isle of the Lost was unregulated, and if you wandered out without a card and without telling anyone, the city council couldn't be responsible.

From the Moorlands came careful trailblazers who came to examine the cities, paw cautiously around the technologies, and then brought their friends and an influx of magic with them. Similar magical restraints still forbade people moving hither or thither, but the laws against magic were permanently done away with. Fairies and Fae and trolls and pixies and all sorts of magical folk were working hand-in-hand with Auradon officials.

Auradon was slowly adapting to the new freedom of power that had come with the updated courts in every kingdom. Already, groups were forming to take new propositions to their kingdom courts. The federal government was almost taking a step back as individual courts took primary power in their areas. Ben still held overall power and had passed several laws to ensure he retained the right to veto any lower laws and re-try any court cases in his palace, but the amount of work required for the High King had dropped to a semi-permanent low.

The ships docked. The sailors tossed ropes down to moor themselves to the docks. Some excited Islanders gathered near the ropes, pointing and probably discussing the possibilities of making it to the ground safely. The gangplank dropped.

Three people led the crusade down. One was a brown-haired teen with neon streaks in her hair. The second was blonde, in pink leather, with Auroria's crown sitting on her head. The last had vibrant blue flames atop his head.

Ben dropped into a bow as the reached the concrete of the docks. Mal laughed and then followed him into a clumsy curtsey. Behind them, everyone else followed. Auradon was welcoming its new partner.

"Welcome to Auradon," Ben announced when he had righted himself. He leaned forward and took Audrey's hand, kissing it quickly. Eliza was given a brief, but firm shake. He held out his hand to Hades, but the god batted it aside and hugged Ben tightly. The Lord of the Undead was misty-eyed when he looked past his son-in-law to his daughter, literally glowing with happiness as she waited for her turn to hug her father.

"This is a momentous occasion," Ben called, raising his voice so the microphones they'd set up to transfer sound to the back of the Auradon crowds could catch every word. "And one that I hope will go down in history as the day our two peoples begin to heal."

Mal elbowed him. "Don't make it too much," she whispered.

Ben elbowed her back. "Says the girl who gave Ericka a sermon."

He tucked his arm through hers and then cleared his throat. "I think I speak for both of us when I say this is a dream come true."

"Something you both clearly specialize in," Eliza quipped.

Mal snorted and laughed. Then they both stepped to the side and made a gesture that they could continue down the gangplank. Audrey went first, leading the way to her parents as dozens of other royals stepped forward to greet the Islanders. People began to stream off of the ships. Some brave souls jumped off and slid down the ropes to make it quicker. Their joy and excitement at finally
being allowed to leave was inexpressible

"So, the bad guys have become the good guys?" Uma wondered as she and Harry walked by, arm in arm. Harry could barely be bothered to stop and shake Mal and Ben's hands before pointing out the beaches to Uma.

"They ain't as clean here as they are on the Isle, but look how big…!"

Fairies flit through the air above their heads. Apparently, they'd come to see the historic event. Mal hummed as a couple began flitting about her hair, combing their hands through her long, purple hair.

Ben squeezed Mal's hand. "This is good," he repeated as people streamed past them, some babbling thanks but most too teary-eyed to notice them.

"It is good," Mal agreed, squeezing back. "We've done good."

What more was there really to be done? To be said? At that moment, everything was perfect. She finally had it all. "I couldn't be more proud or happy to call you my king," She whispered, leaning against Ben's shoulder. She could feel his smile lighting up everything around them even though they weren't looking at each other. Somehow, despite everything, they'd made it out alright.

This was her life. And she wouldn't want it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

I can't really do very many spoilers anymore... I mean there's only the epilogue left. Hmmm...

I'm going to put HRH Deleted scenes up on my Fanfiction.net story "Descendants Stand-Alones." They'll probably be up at the end of January.

I have, like, a bunch of oneshots I'm going to be putting out in February. (I'm taking a break from fanfic for a month after finishing this) One features Parents!Ben and Mal, another is a world where the villains won and now Mal's about to step up as the Queen of the realm when she meets Ben, who is one of the hero's children being passed away as slaves to the villains, and I have another about one where Ben dies and so Hades takes Mal in while she's recovering. Among a bunch of others. So, yeah, those are happening.

Also, if you've read Westward, I'm developing a sequel for that, but I haven't been able to find a way to finish the story properly. Like... I actually felt pretty comfortable with the ending of the first one. I was trying to talk about responsibility and respect in relationships, and I'm not sure how I could properly break Audrey and Ben up or even how I could properly leave them together without going against what I was trying to say. If you have suggestions, shoot me a comment or email me at Allykeystomyheart@gmail.com. (That's a pseudonym email - don't try and find me using it be it won't work.)
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Epilogue, including the birth of the first prince.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Phew! Is that it?"

"Not quite. There are two more scenes we need to show."

"This is truly amazing. I mean, eight-hundred and thirty-three pages! The document page has been lagging since page four-fifty-two."

"It's a large story. But a good one, hopefully."

"This is incredible. I had no idea you and Ben had done so much. I feel a lot closer to you guys now."

"I think it was really smart to have Ben narrate the parts he did. He did a really good job. And I think it was almost a great decision to have you narrate your part."

"Chapter 25? That feels like forever ago!"

"Remember how nervous you were?"

"I was nervous when it was happening in real life too! Looking back though, I don't know why I worried. Sheesh."

"Should we finish it off then and call it a day?"

"A day? Ha, ha. We've been working on this for how many months? But yeah, let's finish."

"It's been nice working with you."

"You too, Mal."

Six months later, the castle was in minor upheaval once again. Stewart had taken the day off from the palace when he'd heard while Sophia rushed around the King and Queen's bedroom, more panicked than she'd be on her wedding day. Former King Adam and Queen Belle were hanging around awkwardly in the library as doors were slammed above their heads and people rushed to and fro.

"We have to call a doctor, Mal!" Ben yelled as he paced back and forth from the bathroom to the living room, yanking on his hair and digging his nails into his head.

"I am not calling a doctor so that they can prod and poke me and tell me things my body already knows. They're just going to make me get into bed and I'm not okay with that at this time in the
day." Mal said as she balanced on a yoga ball and focused on taking long, deep breaths. The poor girl looked like she'd had a basketball shoved under her shirt. She grimaced as another contraction hit.

"They could get you some medicine! An epidural! Or at least tell us how much longer!" Ben yelled back.

"Ben, I get high on a single Advil" Mal frowned at him. They'd unfortunately found that out a few months ago when Mal discovered she couldn't sleep on her stomach anymore and she'd woken up with horrible knots in her side. Not being exposed to any medicines as a kid was definitely doing her in a pinch. "Can you imagine me on all those things they would chalk me up with? And my mother did this naturally, twice, with no doctors whatsoever. I can handle this." Mal rolled her eyes and rubbed her belly as more waves of pain raced through her.

"You haven't seen a doctor your entire pregnancy." Ben huffed, grabbing the back of the couch in anxiety. "Births are dangerous, Mal. We need to call someone."

"Go ahead and try." Mal challenged with a green flash in her eyes. "I'll lock you and everyone else out. Don't think I won't!"

"You can't have a baby by yourself!" Sophia said in an exasperated tone as she rushed back and forth out of the bedroom, carrying plastic sheets and cushy pillows and lots and lots of water. Mal had already said she didn't want to have the baby on the bed, but Sophia was holding out hopes she'd cave for her family's sake of mind. So far, no good.

"For sure, I can!" Mal rolled her eyes. "Tons of girls do it on the Isle all the time. Elsa did that with Jessie, Pocahontas did that with Thomas Rolfe, Ka-Okee, and her other children, Astrid's planning on doing that when she and Hiccup start having kids, and Helena was born in secret, Sophia. Doctors and people as a whole are not necessary."

"No, they-" Sophia sputtered. She spun on Ben. "Ben, tell your wife she can't have a baby alone!"

"She won't listen to me!" Ben exploded. He and Sophia began to spiral into a debate as Mal rolled her eyes, got up, and walked into the bathroom to get herself a glass of water. Neither of the two noticed as she came back, sat down and crossed her ankles.

Alex, the replacement for Lumiere, peeked inside. "Any luck?" He asked.

"No!" Ben and Sophia screamed at the same time.

Mal shook her head daintily. "No." She informed him. "Probably another few hours."

Alex gave them a thumb's up and disappeared from view. He was still considered 'new' but was familiar enough with the royal family to not be fazed by any of their dramatics. Lumiere had finally retired to spend his last days with Plumette after Ben had taken the throne of Exanton.

Ben rubbed his hands up and down his arms. Sand that had started appearing from the stress flew to the floor. Mal watched it fall in amusement. "If you blow up the room, I don't know if I can spell it clean while I'm in labor." She warned. "You might have to vacuum."

"I'd be a lot calmer if you would let me call a doctor." Ben shot back.

"That's a lie," Mal retorted, sipping on her water. "You'd just be bombarding him with questions and dancing around me like I'm a little Auradonian princess. 'It's okay Mal,' 'I've got you, Mal'." She mimicked, making her hand form a little hand puppet.
"I'm just worried." Ben sighed. Sophia nodded in agreement beside him.

"Uh-huh." Mal nodded. "And that is why I think it best if you both step outside now, so I can have our baby in peace without you screaming in my ear and dancing around my feet." She set her water glass down on the table beside her.

"What?" Both Sophia and Ben said at the same time with wide eyes.

Mal stood up and began to shoo them to the door. "Go down to the library and tell Belle and Adam that everything is fine, except now I have a headache. Out you go, now."

"You are in labor!" Sophia protested very slowly. "You will need help!"

"I'll unlock the door if that happens." Mal rolled her eyes and pushed her Auradon friend out of the room. "I'm a big girl. Eighteen, married, queen, the hero of Tartarus, all that jazz. You just go and relax until I'm done."

"What happens if something goes wrong?" Sophia protested.

Mal waved her fingers. "Magic, duh." She turned to Ben, who stubbornly folded his arms and planted his feet.

"I'm staying here," he announced.

Mal chuckled. "Uh-huh, and strike me pink while you're at it. Come on, now." She guided him towards the door.

"But- this is my room too!" Ben protested. "And you're my wife and this is my baby too and I'm really worried about you!"

Mal put a hand on his shoulder. "I got this, man. You're just going to give me a migraine with all your worry. Just chill out, take a breather."

"I thought you said you could do anything with me there?" Ben asked, pouting.

"That's right." Mal nodded. "Anything that comes our way, I can battle down with your support. But that doesn't mean I need you in order to do every single thing in my daily life. Breathing? I got that, easy. Running the moors and Isle? I love your advice, but I still go out and do things, Ben. It's easy. And having a baby? It's easy. Just go calm down. I bet you have about another five hours before you're a dad."

"Easy?" Ben sputtered, but the door was closing in his face. He jumped for the knob, but Mal was infinitely quicker than he was. It was already locked from the other side. He heard Mal humming as she walked away on the other side. He and Sophia shared incredulous looks as a green light sealed itself around the wood, preventing him from being able to unlock it using his sand to twist the knob. Alex walked up the hallway, having returned from the library informing Belle and Adam of the situation.

"Mal locked you out?" He asked casually, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"Can you believe her?" Ben raged as he gestured wildly to the door.

Alex held up his hands in surrender. "Geesh, man, I don't know how you didn't see this coming. She's been making comments about this for months."
Ben growled and stomped past Alex, muttering all the way to the library.

Five and a half hours later, the door to the bedroom unlocked. Ben had spent a whole half-hour in the library before he came up to fume outside of their door. It had been deathly silent except for the sounds of movies. Mal had been watching Moana. He knew this from the background music alone. He hadn't heard her scream or cry once, but about ten minutes ago he had heard a sound like a little wail. He wasn't sure if it had been Mal, or if he was officially a father, or if it was just his imagination.

The door clicked and Mal appeared in the doorway, looking tired, but relaxed. She was skinny again. Her hips were a little wider than he remembered them being when she'd first gotten pregnant, but overall, she hadn't changed much. Her hair was stringy, sticking to her head and full of sweat. Ben's mouth fell open. "Are they finally-" He started to ask.


A son. He had a son. Ben took a big, deep breath. He started to walk inside, but Mal stopped him with her hand. "Ben." She probed. "July twenty-ninth. You know what that means?"

Ben blinked. "What?" He asked.

"It's been two years since I first came to Auradon as a sixteen-year-old." Mal snorted. "Two years later, I'm officially a mom." She punched his arm lightly.

Ben's eyes grew wide. "Woah." He whispered. "Can I see him?"

"Sure." Mal nodded. "He's in the bedroom. I switched the sheets back before he was born so that we can just go straight to bed."

Ben didn't know how she'd done it, but she had. He went straight into the bedroom. Their sheets were back in place. On the bed was a small child, fast asleep and wrapped up inside of a loose blanket. Ben clasped his hands over his mouth as Mal slipped in the doorframe beside him and went to her side of the bed. She laid down on her belly and kissed the child's head with a fond smile as Ben slowly made his way to look down on his first son.

He was perfect. Tiny with his fingers curled tightly around his blankets and a little white blister in the center of his upper lip. He had most of Mal's features, with his small nose, eyes, mouth, and frame, but Ben could see bits of his father and mother mixed in too, which meant he had to be in there somewhere. He supposed that Mal would see most of his features and he would see most of hers and that's just how it would go.

"Woah." He whispered, pressing his hands to his cheeks in awe. Mal chuckled at him.

The baby didn't have much hair, and Ben could see a pulse throbbing at the top of his head, which he assumed was normal. His hands were a little blue and his skin was wrinkly and pink, but he was still on the list of most beautiful sights of Ben's life, the first few being Mal at their wedding, Mal kissing him on the balcony, Mal telling him she was pregnant, he could go on, but he'd stop there.

"He doesn't have any magic; as I predicted," Mal informed him. "Completely human."

"Can I hold him?" Ben asked. She raised an eyebrow and nodded with a half-smile. Carefully, Ben scooped up the new child into his hands, marveling at how light he was. He balanced his head, remembering what it'd been like to hold Madison back when they'd first gotten her. Mal scooted
forward and put another kiss on their son's forehead before pressing a second one to Ben's cheek. "How did you do this?" Ben asked in awe. "You fought a war with him inside you."

"That was for, like, three months." Mal rolled her eyes. "I was barely pregnant."

"You threw up in Pitch's lair." Ben protested.

"Barely pregnant," Mal repeated with a nod. Ben sat down, and she laid her head down on his thigh. He looked over at the clock and stared at the time.

"Did you say he was born at eleven-fifteen?" Ben asked.

"Yeah." Mal nodded with a yawn.

"But that was eighteen minutes ago!" Ben exclaimed, looking down at Mal with a horrified expression. "How do you look so put together? Do you need me to get you anything?"

"Ugh." Mal rolled her eyes and moved away from him. Ben remembered he'd asked the 'forbidden question' too late. 'I'm fine. Moana is cool, Snow White's movie stinks. Everything Sophia hauled in here is stuffed in the bathroom. Baby born, non-magical, eleven-fifteen. I'm alive, he's alive, and I'm exhausted. I want to go to bed, but first, we need to name him and weigh him, and I need a glass of water." Mal sat up and ran a hand down the baby's head. "He's actually really amazing." She whispered.

"Was it worth it for you, then?" Ben asked. "I know you hated it in the beginning, but-"

"I'm fine." Mal laughed. "He's... incredible. And I really, really love him." She leaned her head on Ben's shoulder. "I can't wait for our other ones." She whispered.

"Other ones?" Ben smiled, leaning his head on hers.

"Three, right?" Mal asked. "One for Auradon, one for the Isle, and one for the Moors."

"I wasn't sure you'd still be up to it after all this." Ben laughed. Mal shook her head.

"No." She disagreed. "It's okay. Just not right away." She slid off the bed. "Kiss?" She asked.

"And a lot more after that," Ben responded cheekily, taking her head and pressing their mouths together.

"Mhm." Mal rolled her eyes, and they broke apart. She bent down to kiss her baby's head again. "Mommy loves you." She whispered.

Belle, Adam, Sophia, and Stewart crept back into the room slowly as soon as Mal had left. They looked amazed. "Was that really Mal? Walking?" Belle whispered.

Ben snorted and sat back in amazement. "She literally had him twenty minutes ago, got him and her cleaned up, got dressed, walked to the door to get me, and walked back out for a glass of water."

"How?" Adam asked, in shock. "She's eighteen and this is her first baby!"

"Isle women, man." Ben sighed. "They're freaking invincible."

"Thank you." Mal yawned as she slipped around everyone's backs and sat back down on her side of the bed. "No magic." She announced. "Hope you all caught that. If anyone has any feelings other
than joy at that revelation, you can go screw yourselves."

The small family members laughed as they crowded around the bed, where Ben held his son and smiled brightly. Mal was busy texting her friends. "11:15, boy." She told them. "Standby for name."

"What are you going to call him?" Stewart asked.

"Jay wanted dude-bro for a boy and dude-sis for a girl." Mal pitched in sarcastically. "Audrey voted Luciodragonit and Aprivelei. And he and Audrey are Godparents, so they technically get a say."

"Well, I am Dad and Dad overrides all godparent claims." Ben vetoed, scrunching up his nose in distaste.

Mal hummed in amusement at Ben flaunting his new title and leaned back on the pillows. "I like Zach." She whispered.

"It's not from a name-base," Sophia mentioned. "Most heroes name their kids with the first letters of the names they're known by. You know, Cinderella, Chad?"

"I don't want him to have a name based off us." Mal yawned. "He's his own person."

"He looks like a Zach," Ben whispered, carefully setting the baby down on the bed in between him and Mal while everyone watched.

"You have any suggestions?" Mal asked softly. She was started to doze off at his side.

"Alec?" He asked.

"We have an Alex in the castle already," Mal whispered.

"You're right." Ben nodded. "To be honest, I just didn't want you to think I was agreeing just because you were the first person who said something decent. I really like Zach. Can we do Marshall or Abraham as a middle name?"


"I like Marshall better," Belle whispered. She was without Madison, who had gone to sleep several hours ago. Madison was about to turn one in the coming week.

"Zach Marshall Benson." Mal agreed, dropping her head onto the bed beside her brand-new son.

"We should go find out how much he weighs," Sophia whispered.

"I'll do it." Ben volunteered. "But first, let's get miss Mom to bed." He reached down and ran his fingers through Mal's hair. "She's going to pass out on us."

"She just had a baby," Adam said in a gruff tone.

"Can I hold my grandbaby?" Belle asked, reaching out.

Ben smiled and carefully handed Zach to Belle, who perked up and smiled brightly as she looked down at him. She was officially a grandmother. Mal sat up a little, looking a bit tense as Belle smiled down at the baby. "Don't take him too far!" She called as Belle began to head out into the living room.
Mal's phone was buzzing lightly on the bed beside her. Ben picked it up and sent a text from the lock screen to a group that included Jay and Audrey, the godparents, and Evie, Doug, and Carlos. The text read: "Mal very tired. Name Zach Marshall Benson. Goodnight. -Ben"

Ben crouched down to be eye level with Mal as her eyes fluttered open and closed. "How does it feel?" He asked.

Mal yawned softly, but the small panic in her eyes was still there. "I miss him." She whispered to Ben urgently. "They took my baby away."

Ben smiled and chuckled. "He's just in the living room." He promised her, rubbing little circles on her back. "He's okay."

"I know," Mal grumbled.

"Want to go tell him goodnight before you go to sleep? And I'll put him in his little crib next door and make sure the monitor is on, just like we talked about?" Ben offered.

"The monitor is on your side," Mal grumbled.

"Yeah, that's cause you said he'd be fine and you didn't need to listen to him every minute of both day and night." Ben rolled his eyes. Mal grumbled and swung her legs off the bed.

"Be back." She whispered as she walked to the next room. She swiftly returned, having given her new son another kiss on the head. Ben folded back the covers for her and pulled them up around her shoulders. Even though he knew she could do it, it was still nice to help her out.

"Good job, mom," Ben whispered in her ears. "I'll be right back as soon as Zach is in his room." He stood up and began to turn off the lights.


Ben couldn't help but smile at her tone. "I love you too." He whispered. The only sound that returned his sentiment was the sound of Mal's soft breaths as she faded into unconsciousness.

Years passed. Joy and happiness spread abroad the land. Bad things changed, and good things stayed the same. Days faded to darkness and back again in a lengthy period of peace and happiness that became known as the diamond age of Auradon, with the golden age being the rule of Belle and Adam, the first grand rulers of the United States of Auradon.

Since she and Ben had their magical forms of transportation, they could journey wherever they wanted; whenever they wanted. Mal still visited the moors every month while Ben left the continent for the north, but if they jumped back and forth every now and then, it was okay.

One day, Mal woke up, rolled over and stared at the ceiling, and realized it was January the seventeenth, and she was thirty years old. Fourteen years had passed since she'd first come to Auradon, and twelve years since her first son had been born. Everything was different. Time seemed to be slipping through her fingers.

Everyone had gathered at the palace to celebrate Mal turning another decade. Ben, who was thirty-five now, cried a little when they gathered around in a large circle to recap everything that had happened in the last years. Mal's head spun as her friends remembered things she'd forgotten, or even ignored that they were happening until the moments were far gone.
The Isle of the Lost had petitioned to be renamed The Isle of the Found just before Mal turned twenty. Over the past ten years, they had grown to be a massive production powerhouse, thanks to the hard-working islanders and their extremely determined queen. They had paid back everything they'd borrowed from Auradon and begun to spread across the face of the land until a beautiful modern city stretched out across the entire southern half of the Isle. They produced things for Auradon and occasionally for the moors and the Overlands. Auradon ended up owing a lot of money to the Isle for all the things they manufactured, much to Mal's amusement. Audrey became a key political figure on the Isle, where she petitioned for safety laws, equal opportunity, and all manner of beneficial laws. People were still removed from the city or sometimes banished by Auradon, the Overlands, or even the moors to the northern part of the Isle, but these were rare happenstances compared to all the people who joined the city and helped build it up. The city was named Opulence after a few years. There were no homeless, almost no jobless, and no poverty. The people gave freely of their substance and supported each other, and they were known as the happiest, freest people in the known world, and were completely determined to squash out the old evil ways.

Harry Hook and Uma married on the Isle. Harry received his memories back on the day promised to him by Mal, but they were so painful for him he begged they be taken away again. He made the decision to live without knowing about the Isle before Mal had changed it but shouldered a grudge against Mal for crimes she had committed before she'd become queen, even though he was forever blind to the specifics. Uma had thought about asking for her memories back as well, but once she saw the pain and confusion it caused for Harry had decided it was best to leave the past locked up. She remained friendly with Mal despite the fact Harry suddenly couldn't stand to be near her very long.

Audrey and Jarrett lived on the Isle too, though Audrey traveled back and forth to her kingdom of Auroria every once in a while. She was pregnant with their second kid. Audrey had waited, just like she said she would, and was now well into her thirties. Her young son was only two. She still ruled Auroria from a distance, taught college-level and elementary-level English and French and was an active participant in Isle government.

Meanwhile, the Moorland built up a small city, mostly underground, with one large palace where Mal and Ben would bring their family for vacations. Aside from individual traveling in between the moors and Auradon, the moors tended to stay separate from the other countries. They kept their own traditions, observed their own holidays, and worked for the betterment of their own nation. But having their borders open aided Auradon and the Isle greatly as they began to accept again the magic that had once held no stipulation across the lands.

Far, far above Auradon, the Exanton had begun to heal. They had started recovering the pillaged lands that the villains had overtaken in the Great Overland War, and still paid Auradon and the Moorlands tribute for their services in the war. Jack and Ericka Frost were honorary citizens of all four countries and traveled to and fro as they wished. The Guardian of fun and the spirit of snow tended to centralize their visits to family in Arendelle but still visited the palace often to pay thanks to the royal family there. Most of the other Exanton heroes stayed in the Overland, helping to heal the lands, but Mal wondered if there would come a day where there was free travel between the two lands. It seemed extremely possible, as planes from the city of Municiberg were now being manufactured by the Isle and airports were spreading across Auradon, providing greater transport and helping to connect the large nation.

Lastly, Auradon. Ben had worked hard, traveling around and instigating thousands of changes in Auradon. Thousands of service activities, many new laws passed, and a great example set by the Isle of the Found finally formed Auradon into a unified community. Royals shared wealth, power, and prestige openly with commoners and commoners worked hard to support their governments.
With time, there were none in the land who were poor of substance in any area of Auradon. The prophecy bestowed by Adam to Ben finally came true. Under Ben's watchful care, Auradon grew and flourished more than any country (Besides the Isle) had been known to flourish before. On Ben and Mal's tenth anniversary, Auradon news became the first to issue the official statement that King Benjamin was 'by far, the finest and greatest King Auradon will ever have'. No one realized the prophecy had been fulfilled until after it had been printed. Thousands of history books would forever inscribe the same of the King of the Diamond Age of Auradon.

Jay and Lonnie had hit it off quite well in college. They stayed together while he traveled around doing tourney for the official team of Auradon before she convinced him to marry her after they won the country cup for the fourth year in a row. He still worked with tourney while Lonnie coached for smaller groups until the two of them would eventually decide to settle down with their multitudinous savings and start a family.

Carlos and Jane had dated throughout her college years and on the eve of graduation, Carlos had asked her to marry him. They settled in San Fransokyo, where Carlos started a company, taught at his old college, and traveled around Auradon with his wife on the weekends. They had one child and three dogs together.

Evie had held off settling down for a while. She'd gotten a Ph.D. and a business license to spread a business named "Evie's 4 Hearts" around the kingdom, and then Doug had finally convinced her that he was the right guy for her. They had two children together who they balanced with Doug's continuing job as the Castle IT guy, and Evie running a large design company which Dizzy eventually joined her in. Dizzy was engaged to be married to a son of Grumpy next spring. Her adopted brother Ethan would take over the kingdoms of Cinderellasburg and Charmington in her stead.

Sophia and Stewart had married around the time Mal was twenty. Mal had been her maid of honor and Ben had been his best man. Sophia had considered letting Ben walk her down the aisle to complete the traditional circle of it, but in the end, her dad walked her down, and everything was fine. She retired from the palace soon after and she and Stewart made a home for themselves down in Auradon city, from where the Isle of the Found could be seen.

Plumette had passed away with Lumiere standing beside her bed one cold Winter's eve. Lumiere had moved back into the palace to spend his remaining years with the only family he had left. It sounded like a sad ending, but Lumiere held the utmost hope that he would see her again in death.

Adam threw out his back badly and he and Belle decided it best to stay in a localized area after that. They lived in a room beside the library and the family visited them whenever they walked past. Madison was a teenager now, vivacious and free, just like Mal had known she'd be. She ran the halls, flew clumsily, and experimented fully with her magic. She didn't know the former world where magic was forbidden or where villainy lived trapped on the Isle of the Lost. She grew up the adopted daughter of the former king and queen, understanding fully the circumstances she'd come from. She was very close to her sister and her two older brothers, Ben and Jay. Mal thanked the gods every day that Madison would never have to go what she went through.

And finally, the royal family themselves. Mom, Dad, and all three children. Zach Marshall Benson, the oldest, was twelve years old. Mal couldn't believe it. Her first son was almost a teenager. He was in line to become King of all of Auradon, and he was as kind-hearted and sweet as his father before him. Blonde, with green eyes and a mischievous smile, but quiet and thoughtful. He was on a swim team, played guitar, and read a lot.

Their second son was named Tyler James Benson. Mal had had him on December thirteenth, less
than two years after Zach had been born. Mal had been nineteen. With his birth, Ben had finally
gotten the opportunity to be present during his wife's labor, though Mal still refused a doctor. He
took more after his mom (And maybe by extension his grandmother) than his siblings. Wild and
crazy, expressive and free, he climbed trees and sang wild and fast songs and performed the same
type of magic that Mal, Madison, and Maleficent had been able to perform. He looked like Ben but
had Mal's signature purple locks. It made for a very interesting combination. He was only eleven,
but it had already been decided between him and his parents that he would one day become King of
the Moorlands, and he would live out there on the moors when the time came that he decided he
wanted to accept the throne there. Mal had taken it at sixteen, but Tyler wanted to wait a little
longer. "Maybe when I'm twenty-two." He'd decided jokingly, figuring he'd probably wait longer
than that.

Since Mal had given Ben two children before she'd even turned twenty, she'd made the decision
that there needed to be a bit more time in between their next and last child. On April 7th of Mal's
twenty-sixth year, she'd given birth to their only girl. Her name was Belle Marie Benson, and she
was her father's child with her mother's looks. Thick purple hair and beautiful blue eyes even at her
young age of four. She inherited, not her mom's magic, but Ben's dark, sandy fear magic. Marie
was going to grow up to be the queen of the Isle of the Lost, the last kingdom of the three. They
called her Little Belle to differentiate from Ben's mother.

Ben and Mal focused a lot on what it meant to use their magic for good. Instead of focusing on the
heroic parts of their tales, they carefully outlined what Pitch Black had been able to do with fear
magic, how Helena had almost killed Ben, and the terror that Maleficent had once wrought upon
the land. The kids never feared their magic, but they were expressly warned of everything that
could happen if they let their talents rule them, instead of the other way around.

Despite his many successes and his express joy in his kingdom, King Benjamin much preferred
being home with his wife and kids to being anywhere else. While Mal traveled in and out of the
castle on her way to and from the moors and the Isle, he was the one who stayed home and
watched her leave and come back to him every day. Ben was close to every member of his
extended family as well, from Dizzy to Jay and Stewart, and he was proud of it. As the years
passed, not a day went by that Mal didn't hear from her husband exactly how much he loved each
and every one of them, be she in the moors or at home.

And finally, the Queen of Auradon herself. If you'd brought young fifteen-year-old Mal from the
Isle and introduced them to each other, they wouldn't know each other. Mal ruled in power, glory,
and goodness. The time came where everyone in all four kingdoms – Auradon, Exanton, the Isle
and the Moors – accepted her word as gold, even though she wasn't a ruler of two of those
countries. People came from all over just to see her. Just to hear the stories of what she'd done from
her own lips.

Mal had long since found peace in who she was, but she'd never known what it would feel like to
be glorified for the strength of her character. She looked back on the years and was simply blown
away by everything that had henceforth happened. It was incredible to her.

Unlike most parents, Mal would admit she took greater pride in her marriage than in her children.
Not to mean she didn't adore each of them individually; they were the express products of her love
of Ben, and she loved them with all her heart. But with all the things that could have gone wrong
and ruined her and Ben forever, she considered it an amazing achievement that they'd survived.
Mal spent most of her time being a wife first, and then a mother, and then a ruler, and then a friend.
She felt fulfilled in her life and in everything she'd done, yet she still felt like she'd forgotten to do
something she should have done many years ago.
As evening fell on her thirtieth birthday and the seniors of their group – Lumiere, Belle, and Adam – began to retire, Mal sipped on her water and listened to her friends talk excitedly about all that had happened, and everything that was coming up. Ben squeezed her shoulders and stood up to take Little Belle, who was falling asleep against Mal’s legs, to bed. Tyler was shooting sparks at Zach, who was deflecting them with a book and a hidden smile.

Mal stood and walked over to the balcony of the family room, where everyone had gathered. She looked out over the snow-covered groups and watched the sky turn magnificent shade of purple and red as the temperature began to drop a little further.

Someone put a hand on her shoulder. "You okay?" Audrey asked.

Mal smiled. "I am." She confirmed.

"How does it feel to be thirty?" Audrey asked, sitting on the rail with a hand crossed around her stomach.

"I feel like… I'm forgetting things that have happened." Mal admitted. "And if I'm forgetting, who's to say everyone won't have forgotten thirty years down the road?"

Audrey laughed. "No one will forget you, Mal. The details may fog, but your story is… expansive."

She and Mal both laughed cheerily. Mal drummed her fingers on the balcony. "Do you think you could help me write it all down?" She asked.

Audrey looked surprised. "Well, I probably could. How long do you think that'd be?"

Mal snorted. "At least eight-hundred pages long." She said sarcastically, not knowing how right she'd end up being.

Audrey laughed alongside her. "Okay. Let's get together tomorrow and you can start from the beginning."

Mal wrinkled her nose. "The beginning… I'd have to start with the war and the Isle of the Lost. And that's like, twenty years before anything even happened."

Audrey jumped off the railing and stood beside Mal. "You could just start with a prologue." She shrugged casually.

Mal raised an eyebrow. "What's a prologue?" She asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It's a thing you do when you don't want the story to start at the beginning," Audrey said with a content sigh. She began to undo the ponytail her hair was in, running her fingers along her scalp.

Mal considered her words and folded her arms. She looked out to the sunset and watched as the sun began to disappear. Family members continued to chatter in the room behind her. "That sounds… perfect." She exhaled with a smile. Audrey smiled brightly, and Mal chuckled. Behind them, all was well, and everyone was content.

The End.

Chapter End Notes
I'm kinda having to hold back tears even though I'm not even posting this yet. I'm just adding it as a draft until later tonight.

End Notes

I don't own Descendants, Maleficent, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, Frozen, or any of the Disney Characters mentioned therein. For Archive of Our Own, I will tag as I go. For Fanfiction Network, no settings will change.

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